



The Madonna of Excelsior

Zakes Mda

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"A generous, patient, wry and intelligent voice...[that] suggests not just a writer who can seduce us through beautiful language and unfailing humor. We also encounter a writer who has the power to shock and frighten us, to astound and anger and unsettle us...In short, his is a voice for which one should feel not only affection but admiration." --Neil Gordon, *New York Times Book Review*

Selection, Summer Reading, *New York Times Book Review*

In 1971, nineteen citizens of Excelsior in South Africa's white-ruled Free State were charged with breaking apartheid's Immorality Act, which forbade sex between blacks and whites. Taking this case as raw material for his alchemic imagination, Zakes Mda tells the story of one irrepressible fallen madonna, Niki, and her family, at the heart of the scandal.

The Madonna of Excelsior Details

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Laurie says

Excellent book, based on an actual case in 70s South Africa, and describing paintings by an actual artist. It takes us up to post-apartheid times, when a woman who was imprisoned as a baby merely because she was half-white becomes part of the new inclusive government. It is a celebration of love, of motherhood (as the title suggests), art, literature, freedom and overthrowing racist governments. But the happy ending is nuanced: the government is not without corruption, and there is a lot of work to do. The book is at times painful because of the events it described, but it is always vivid and compelling.

Alex Hoffman says

Really glad that this book was set for my English seminar. Mda writes beautifully and his imagery really sticks in your mind. He tells the story of the "scandal" of Excelsior in 1971 but threads this into a bigger picture of Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa. Mda confronts a lot of the hard truths about expedience, corruption and racism involved in the creation of the "new South Africa" and does this, for the most part, really well. However, I think that he does too much almost textbook style explaining and some of the things that characters say towards the end are way too blatant to be realistic. People don't say exactly what they think and they don't often think what an outsider, a voyeur, may want them to think. This sort of clean-cut dialogue detracted from an otherwise poetic and beautiful book.

Lisa says

3.5 stars!

Lark Benobi says

This was a bland book with cardboard characters that were moved around in obvious ways to stand for certain generalized experiences of South Africans living through the late apartheid era, and on into the post-apartheid era. The blend here between fact and fiction did not take off--the story makes weird and unnecessary changes from the facts of Excelsior, while the fiction feels like heavy dough that never rises. The book disappointed me especially because I really enjoyed Mda's *Ways of Dying*, which was in every way a surprising and marvelous first novel.

Dillon says

A truly artistic tale told during the end of Apartheid in South Africa. During a time when it was illegal for whites to have sex with blacks, one of the protagonists, Niki, is put on trial and spends time in prison for giving birth to a blue eyed daughter Popi. The story then follows Niki, her son Viliki and Popi through the

end of apartheid and post apartheid worlds. All the while Popi tries to find her place in the world, never feeling totally black, and never white.

Although the story is amazing, the beauty is in the way Mda tells the story. He brilliantly mends together descriptions of painting of the characters with stories of the characters lives, creating a vivid picture of the Rainbow Nation.

Nyakallo Lephoto says

The *Madonna of Excelsior* is a novel that highlights the plight that once engulfed the community of Mahlatswetswa in Excelsior, Free State, where several white men were accused of having coerced sexual relations with black women from which children were born.

During apartheid, interracial sexual relations, consensual or not, were not only forbidden but illegal.

Mda uses a story of Poppie, a child born of a white male farmer raping a female black employee, to relate how the township of Mahlatswetsa ended with children born of his violation of privileged white men taking advantage of desperately poor and disempowered black women.

Sammy says

Most times, books talking about South Africa either show the wealthy, fancy, stuck-up white side of South Africa, or the stereotypical native, out in the grassland black native. But *The Madonna of Excelsior* shows both sides, the inbetween.

It's no surprise the rich are white and the poor are black. But what about the ones they call "colored"? The ones who are both black and white? This book explores that.

Zakes Mda is an amazingly detailed writer, his words helping the reader see everything he speaks of in perfect clarity. The only thing that bothered me about his writing, or at least this book, was the description of a painting at the beginning of each chapter. But that's solely a personal opinion, because while it sometimes helped push the story along, most of the time I felt it pulled me from it.

At times I felt the story didn't really have a plot to it, it's more of a character driven book rather than plot driven, and even then the characters didn't do too much driving.

Still there was something that kept me reading and enthralled. Maybe it was Mda's beautiful words or his attention to detail. It could have been his characters and their journey to better themselves and the world around them. But whatever it was, something grabbed at me and kept me reading.

I warn you that this may be one of those cup of tea books: it's either your cup of tea or it isn't. Still give it a chance.

Sandra Helen says

Set in South Africa, the novel is based on true events that occurred during apartheid. The protagonist shows us what life was like for a black woman during that time, how she was raped, used, and abused by white men. She bore a "coloured" daughter by the husband of a woman she worked for, caring for their son, who of course was the brother to her daughter. She was arrested and charged under the Immorality Laws. Her daughter grew up in political opposition to her half-brother. The protagonist was a strong, loving woman and made for an interesting read. The style of the book is also interesting as brief parts of the book narrate paintings and their subjects. The book itself is dedicated to a bird in a painting.

Eric says

Magnificent novel centred on the charming small town of Excelsior in South Africa. Sex across the colour line - with invariable consequences

Friederike Knabe says

Fiction does not always facilitate or augment the understanding of complex realities of time and place. Zakes Mda, however, has achieved this mixture admirably in this novel of his native South Africa. The political events of pre- and post-Apartheid periods take a central place in the story. Yet he manages to avoid being overly heavy on facts and details as he builds the narrative around the impact of one specific event and its aftermath on one small community, Excelsior. He captures the essence of life under Apartheid and the difficulties awaiting all when the regime ends. Old prejudices and tensions remain and the transition to the new SA adds new challenges and conflicts, including among the black political leadership.

Mda uses the 1971 case of the Excelsior 19 as the focus of the first part of his account. A group of white men and black women were charged with violation of the Immorality Act that prohibits intimate relations across race lines. The primary character is Niki, one of the Excelsior 19 women, whose life story is a symbol for this time and place. As a naïve, pretty 18 year old, she attracts the attention of a white Afrikaner who assaults her and keeps pursuing her. Escape into marriage is some protection and also results in her confidence growing. Life is good with a husband and her son, Viliki. Never questioning her role as a servant and second class citizen, a humiliating incident with her white woman boss changes all that.

Her rage leads her to take revenge. Realizing her power as a black beauty and the hold it has over white Afrikaners, she applies it deliberately. The mixed-race daughter Popi is evidence of the hushed-up relationship. Despite the indisputable evidence of children like Popi, the charges against the Excelsior 19 are withdrawn. Still, those implicated and their families have to somehow work out their lives and their various relationships: within families, among neighbours, between Afrikaners, English and Blacks and Coloured. Niki and her children also suffer the consequences. As the narrative of their lives continues, the focus shifts to Popi and her extraordinary beauty. Her features increasingly reveal her parentage to everybody in the community. In the new SA she can play an important role in the community despite the continuing suspicions against mixed race people, who are "not black enough".

Mda does an excellent job of bringing diverse individuals to life. We see them from different angles, we empathize with them and comprehend them as part of a larger reality being played out. Nothing is

black and white (excuse the pun!), nobody is all "good" or all "bad". Mda acknowledges that Afrikaners maintain their dreams of returning to power and depicts realistically the political conflicts within the black leadership. He introduces two kinds of observers to the novel: Father Claerhout, the Belgian priest-artist living in the region and a knowledgeable "we" narrator. The "trinity" (man, Father, painter), as the Father is referred to, is fascinated by black "madonnas" who sit for him in all their nude loveliness and grace. Niki becomes a preferred subject, mainly because of beautiful young Popi.

The chapters open with the description of one of the trinity's paintings. They create an imaginary world with blue or purple madonnas in lush robes or naked, sitting in yellow corn fields, among surreal bright sunflowers or surrounded by pink and white star like blossoms. The child of the heavy-set full-breasted Madonna is of a lighter shade of brown and with delicate features. Sometimes other elements are added, creating portraits of life in the rural community. Semi-abstract and dreamlike, the paintings are reminiscent of van Gogh. They are always a lead in to the chapter and often the protagonists literally walk off the canvas. The transition between bold imagination and reality is fluid. We, the reader, follow with curiosity and emotion. To complement the trinity's visions, the "we" observer steps in to reflect on people and events. Assumed to be witnesses of Popi's generation, they follow her closely and comment in particular on the attention and mixed feelings she draws in the community. Sometimes critics, sometimes voyeurs, they establish the connections between the paintings and the reality of this microcosm that represents South Africa.

Mda's novel is wide-ranging and multifaceted. While it moves fast through time and events, it allows pauses to ponder scenes and portraits of life and invites reflection of decisive historical events in modern South Africa. You will come away enriched and keen to read more by this remarkable autho

Zandile says

i enjoy reading the book by Mr Mda, lately i have become a fan of his work.The book is set in the apartheid era when blacks where not allowed to mingle with the white foks.reading the book i was able to identify few themes.Forgiveness, self-acceptance. forgiveness- would come in the form of Niki coming into terms with her past and the guilt she had when her daughter was batlling with acceptance. And self acceptance would be Popi, she had difficulty accepting who she was and the fact that she was different from the black girls in her community and she looked alot like the 'whites'. She was costantly teased about her hair and her appearence. this made her resent especially her hair because they were a constant remainder that she was different. As the novel was ending she was able to love,appreciate who she is. even her mother was able to observe this sudden change in her daughter:" I am so happy that atlast you are so free of shame about being coloured ..." (mda,2002:260). The acceptance that took place in Popi allowed Niki the mother to forgive and move on, she was no longer afraid for her daughter. Niki: " For along time, I felt guilty that i had failed you... that i had made you coloured!Every time they mocked and insulted you, it ate my heart and increased my guilt".The novel is for any one wanting to know how ordinary families like that of Pule and Cronje delt with issues that had risen becuase of they behaviour.

Thobile says

Lovely. i read this book twice and really enjoyed it. It is a colourful exploration of the exelsior scandal that took place in a small town is Azania during apartheid, when a group of white men (including the town

dominee) were arrested along with 21 black women for contravening the immorality act. Under this law it was illegal for black and white people to have "relations".

Of course the whole was grossly unfair because the power relations in the town made it impossible for the black women to deny the advances of the white men, and then later to defend themselves in court.

The evidence presented in court against the women was... their babies!

If you haven't yet - read this book.

Paul Lothane says

Zakes Mda is probably the best novelist in Africa today, and certainly the most prolific. This is one of his most impressive works, taking a very close look at how what used to be illicit sex across the colour lines would impact on a particular community. There is a skillful constant introduction to chapters by reference to drawing. Nikky, Poppy and other characters are very well rounded and convincing. The author is firmly objective in presenting the characters, white, black, or coloured. It is not only whites who discriminate, we see, as the coloured ones are not the darlings of many blacks too. A very intelligent, powerful work.

Yandisa says

The art descriptions in the beginning of each chapter were rather annoying and that is the only flaw. I enjoyed the pace of the story and the smooth transition from apartheid to post apartheid South Africa.

Daniel says

Another great and educating read by Zakes Mda. This one takes us to Free State and to the privilege, discrimination, and struggles of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The small town of Excelsior, set up by white farmers, has an amazing variety of characters along the political and racial spectrum - moderate white people, radical racists who take advantage of black women during the Age of Immorality, black resistance fighters, opportunists, corrupt officials and the average folk who just want to be left alone. Again Zakes Mda manages to portray a complex issue with a great number of facets over different generations without making the book a difficult read.
