

Flashback Hotel

Ivan Vladislavi

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The past is the present is the future in *Flashback Hotel*, the masterful new short story collection by Ivan Vladislavi. Alternately whimsical and deeply affecting, the collection explores South African culture and the impact of belief on the daily lives of ordinary people.

Vladislavi writes with deadly playfulness. In his imaginary Johannesburg, nothing is what it seems. Each story in *Flashback Hotel* peels back the layers of reality, revealing the magical world beneath what's immediately apparent. A child feeds the hole in the backyard, sleeps under a blanket of meat. A bomber waits in the city hotel he's exploded: broken pipes, pieces of piano, and dead waiters are collected and covered in cement.

This is a bleak, dangerous world, where political agitation can transform the ordinary into a surreal nightmare in a single moment. However, it's not all frightening. *Flashback Hotel* has a rare beauty, with delicately drawn images that offset its apocalyptic scenes. For example, a linen suit is "fresh cream with a dab of butter in it, richly textured, the pockets cool as arum lilies."

Apartheid, racism, and political unrest are frequent themes in *Flashback Hotel*. The collection's characters grapple with apartheid in different ways: no matter what they do, it's as impossible to ignore as the giant stone head of Lenin that appears on a pedestal at the end of Bulkin Street. The collection plays with South Africa's legacy of race violence, including frequent references to segregation, disenfranchisement, and glorifying racist leaders. *Flashback Hotel* is a satirical look at the "good old days" of South Africa. It asks the question, "Good for whom?"

Weaving elegant description and deeply disturbing imagery, *Flashback Hotel* is a remarkable collection of short stories that destroy the barriers between reality and fantasy, exposing the struts and bones beneath each suburban street.

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