

## Tales of the Metric System

**Imraan Coovadia**

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*This masterfully written book is a thoroughly engaging look at a society in transition.*

With *Tales of the Metric System*, Imraan Coovadia uses an innovative structure and masterful writing to craft a portrait of life in South Africa through the transition away from apartheid. By writing his novel as a series of short stories, with some characters reappearing and others referenced, Coovadia combines everyday life and political turmoil in a thoroughly enjoyable book.

The story opens in 1970, with the wife of a white professor visiting her son's school, which wants to expel him for possessing alcohol, but which is clearly reacting to the professor's antiapartheid politics. From there, the story skips ahead three years, introducing a young black man looking to break into theater and making what will prove important lifelong acquaintances. As the story progresses, each chapter skips ahead and characters move in and out, creating a fuller picture of the myriad ways changes in South Africa affected people's lives. Characters include white, black, and Indian citizens, and both radicals and establishment figures. Some characters give way to their descendants; others cross paths in unexpected ways.

Memorable moments, like the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the Springboks' Rugby World Cup victory, and the 2010 FIFA World Cup, are part of the narrative, but the focus rightly remains on characters. Arguably the most important event in the novel—the one which impacts all of the characters in some way, but which takes place in the time between the first two chapters—isn't depicted until the chapter that closes the book, making it the sole flashback chapter and giving it added weight because readers are already familiar with its impact.

Coovadia's prose is strong throughout, whether in the snappy dialogue between two flirting teenagers trying to recover a stolen cell phone, or in relating the story behind a playwright's unexpected popularity, or in the appropriately grim depiction of an accused thief being burned with a tire around his neck. Each of the chapters in *Tales of the Metric System* could stand on its own, but the whole is a thoroughly engaging look at a society in transition.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Summer 2016)

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