

The Quality of Mercy: The City of Kings Trilogy

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu

Catalyst Press (Sep 5, 2023)

Softcover \$19.99 (427pp)

978-1-946395-86-3

A country's first Black chief inspector investigates the disappearance of a powerful white man in Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's spellbinding mystery novel *The Quality of Mercy*.

Spokes, once a porter for the British Army, felt convicted by his family's unjust past. He joined the police force in hopes of tilting the balance toward good. In 1979, he recalls an unsolved murder in which the victim was mutilated and found on Emil Coetzee's land.

Meanwhile, Spokes's wife, Loveness, is a beauty whose interest he piqued back when he won her village's riddle challenge. She's eager for his retirement. But he's compelled by one last case: Coetzee, the leader of the Organization of Domestic Affairs, vanished in the veld just as a ceasefire began. And too many witnesses saw Coetzee on the day that it happened.

With a cast that includes a troubled journalist, a Coetzee impersonator, men who work in intelligence, a mistress, and a postal worker, this conclusion to the City of Kings trilogy gathers southern African people whose motley perspectives reveal the country's racial tensions and the sometimes comical views that men and women hold about each other. Traumas involving illicit relationships are tempered by rich bemusement about the cast; literary allusions, too, vault the novel into quirky, rather than ominous, territory.

As Spokes ambles through courtesies in his interviews, he evaluates people with piercing alacrity: he's a quintessential inspector who discerns just as much from what people fail to say as from what they claim. And the cold case generates suspense about how the past complicates the present. The result is a fascinating tale driven by a missing man's impact on those left behind.

In the mystery novel *The Quality of Mercy*, southern African history is seen from memorable perspectives, and justice is dealt in singular, surprising terms.

KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2023)

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