

Asylum.

Marcus Low.

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Marcus Low might be known to some for his involvement with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) as its erstwhile policy director. The important work of this organisation in ending the South African government's intransigence in establishing and maintaining effective public-treatment campaigns for HIV and Aids during especially the early 2000's is well known. *Asylum* is Low's debut novel and it is a text clearly marked by the work he would have been involved in during his time with the TAC.

Within the context of climate breakdown and, recently, the breakout and rapid global spread of the coronavirus COVID-19, Low's novel seems to have been hauntingly prescient about the kinds of horrors

the future might hold for humanity—especially since it was first published in 2017, a number of years before the incontrovertible truth about climate disaster and the unavoidable health threat of the coronavirus had become the stuff of persistent daily news coverage, and, moreover, lived experiences. *Asylum* would thus certainly fall into the subgenre of the dystopian novel, though it seems in some ways almost uninterested in bombarding the reader with the establishment of its antiutopian setting, unlike many other novels in this genre. It follows the character of Barry James, a man interned in a hospital in the Great Karoo, as a consequence of being infected with what is known as “pulmonary nodulosis”. The disease slowly destroys the lungs of its host (the processes of which the reader sees in some detail throughout the course of the narrative) and is incurable. And it is not without reason that the Pearson quarantine facility where Barry lives, is in the Karoo. The novel is set in a very near future wherein the South African government has determined that the best way to deal with those afflicted by this terrible disease is to simply quarantine them far away from society. Ostensibly, this is to give them full-time care, but really, as becomes apparent to the reader, it is simply a convenient place to let sick human beings die, away from the eyes of the public.

It is impossible to read this novel right now without drawing comparisons with the global health crisis faced globally due to the spread of COVID-19. Indeed, while the intended parallel was clearly to be between *Asylum's* fictional disease and the very real HIV/Aids epidemic, the novel attains a kind of horrible (while of course unintentional, but nonetheless interesting) new dimension when viewed in relation to the coronavirus. So, for instance, appears the involvement of the premier of the Eastern Cape province, who visits the quarantine facility—as seen from a distance by Barry and another inmate—and speaks to the doctor in charge, Dr Von Hansmeyer: “Von Hansmeyer walked straight to a plump, bespectacled man who held out a hand for him to shake. They talked for a few minutes, Von Hansmeyer gesticulating toward the hospital. And then, quite suddenly, the visitors climbed back into their cars and drove back up the hill, out of sight, back to the outside world” (31). Musing that the premier could not have seen much of the “freak show,” Barry's companion observes something chillingly familiar to those who remember the lacklustre and obstinate position of South Africa's initial real response to HIV/Aids: “No, sirree, but he can tell his fat-cat buddies that he's been here and seen what things are like. We'll probably read about it in tomorrow's paper” (31). This assertion is

proven true, unsurprisingly, in the political rhetoric employed by the premier in a subsequent briefing to the media regarding his visit: “Premier Nkonyeni denied allegations that the province will soon be incapable of paying the wages of health workers. [...] He also reasserted the province’s dedication to containing the outbreak of pulmonary nodulosis and denied suggestions that economic difficulties would make the continued implementation of the national strategic plan an impossibility in the region” (43–4). So far, so dystopian.

Yet, while the political satire is certainly present throughout most of the novel, and the reader is invited to join in a cynical acceptance of the vacuity of modern-day politics, the author succeeds in keeping the narrative focus on the lived experiences of the protagonist too. It is the complexity and unreliability of Barry’s subjectivity and personal history that will confound the reader who might be looking for a narrative that presents the diseased as only victim and saint. This is achieved through the use of the narrative technique of the rediscovered journal containing the personal reflections of a character, framed and pieced together as a story for the reader by fictional researchers, quite similar to the structure of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019). It is in some of these writings by Barry where Low’s prose truly shines.

In one section of the “marginalia” that at times precedes some of Barry’s journal entries, the researchers comment on the character’s writing: “One of the most striking stylistic features of Mr James’ journals is the way in which the text vacillates between vivid, descriptive narrative and stark, terse writing. Although he writes mostly with a relatively clear and distinct voice, there are indications that he is experimenting with both style and content” (59). This layering of the narration invites the reader to consider the histories and historicisation of disease and illness in a way that also implicates the author and the reader in these processes. Subsequently, it broaches again the enduring question around illnesses: How are we to write and read them?

Asylum offers, through its depiction of a dystopic world, a view on how very wrong things can go when societies have to grapple with diseases that threaten the very existence of our species. It does so, however, with an admirably careful and steady hand, and the story seldom gives in to the excesses of dystopian imagining. Consequently, the world of Low’s novel is calmly but unsettlingly believable, and it is a thought-provoking read—particularly so during a real global pandemic.

This is a strong debut and a welcome addition to dystopic South African fiction.

Reinhardt Fourie

fourir@unisa.ac.za

University of South Africa

Pretoria, South Africa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1292-8140>

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