

## Survivor Guilt

### Complicity and the Novels of South African Writer Sheila Kohler

An Essay by John Martin

As the author of one of the few nearly perfect novels I have read in the last several years, *Cracks*, South African-born Sheila Kohler is a writer deserving of much wider attention. What makes *Cracks* such a triumph of personal aesthetic is the focus it brings to Kohler's themes, while layering new elements onto what may appear to be familiar landscapes.

Setting and climate are critical. They help the reader see and experience the world Kohler is about to create, and they also lay bare a certain moral indifference whose boundaries spread out to infinity:

*The white sky meets the flatness of the plain, pressing down heavily all around. In front of the school nothing moves except the shimmer of heat. It is all distance: flat land, sky, and the slight trace of the river that runs slow and dun beside the graves toward the low, blue hills.*

When I asked her in an interview last fall about process, Kohler admitted to the importance of setting in her work: "I find that if I can get the place right, the physical details of the place, then the rest starts to come." *Cracks* raises her descriptive skills to new levels of resonance by infusing the setting with its own peculiar sense of character, creating yet another omniscient participant in events. Compared to her more recent novel *Children of Pithiviers*, where her descriptive passages may be even more dazzling, *Cracks*, as a novel, succeeds where *Children* does not. When setting is so very critical as it is with this writer, the degree to which it is integrated into the whole becomes a sort of litmus test of her art.

Kohler's ability to convincingly implicate the reader in the crimes committed by her characters is also a litmus test of sorts. Like a hunter stalking prey through the brush, murder and death always seem to be lurking somewhere in her work. In *The Perfect Place*, the pathologically detached narrator may or may not have murdered someone. Culpability itself drives the narrative forward, and we find ourselves examining our own experiences for explanations not evidenced in the work. So much like real life. How often have we sat in front of the television shaking our heads at some senseless act of violence, trying to fathom how such a thing could have happened?

Kohler says: "I try to get into the minds of my characters and follow them along, little by little, to make their actions understandable, if not excusable, so that the crime becomes almost inevitable or at least the logical conclusion of their thoughts and feelings." Nowhere does she accomplish this to greater effect than in *Cracks*, where Kohler and the reader, in fact, are among the murderers. There is no perspective or distance between the author, the reader, and the 13 characters involved

in the murder, in terms of the crime. This is an act of authorial daring liable to create serious problems for readers who prefer to stand on the outside and render judgment. After all, how can we call ourselves blameless if the author herself is willing to try such large guilt on for size?

Returning to the more conventional first-person narrative of *Children of Pithiviers*, the enormity of the crimes alluded to does not have the same power, though the author has set out to implicate the reader again. About this book, Kohler said: "I don't want to give the reader the feeling that I am looking down on my characters, or judging them in any way, but rather that I, too, am complicit in some way in their crimes, as the reader also becomes, in a way, by reading the book." Obviously, finding a

way to convey this idea in the work can take many forms. In *Children of Pithiviers*, Kohler deals with the issue by muddying the apparent innocence of the novel's principal "victim." In *Cracks*, however, all avenues of escape have been blocked. Either we accept culpability or put the book down.

Kohler uses other, even more compelling techniques to present her ideas. The act of remembrance (or, perhaps more to the point, as the author wryly comments, "not remembering") creates suspense in her work—with a twist.

Characters are frequently living under the weight of memories yet to be revealed to the reader. This shifts the focus from the event and its effect on the characters to memory itself and how we alter our memories to spare ourselves the pain of our own involvement and sense of responsibility. "The act of remembering," she says, helps "me to address the themes of denial, of hypocrisy—particularly in the postcolonial and racist society that existed in South Africa—and of the lies we all tell ourselves and others in our basic and perhaps necessary refusal to see so much of the human condition as well as, of course, ultimately our inevitable demise." Kohler pulls us forward into her novels by telegraphing the eventual revelation of some ghastly deed, but in the meantime she uses the knowledge her characters refuse to acknowledge as a backdrop for other, far more profound dramas, such as the effects of apartheid in South Africa.

Fiamma Corona, the young girl whose life is eventually taken in *Cracks*, is described as a "foreigner" and an "aristocrat."

*We were nasty to all new girls, especially foreigners. We were proud of our new country's independence, even if our mothers still called England home.*

Apartheid cannot be too far away, the author seems to be saying, from a voice so rife with intolerance.

And yet the guilty go on, living their lives as best they are able, burying the parts of their past too painful to contemplate. Not once do the girls in *Cracks* make an open admission of what they have done. The closest they come to a confession occurs in the section titled "Reunion," the point where the novel begins:

*"You were such a close-knit team, were you not? Devoted to one*

#### Novels by Sheila Kohler:

**Children of Pithiviers**

(Zoland, 2001)

**Cracks**

(Zoland, 1999)

**The House on R Street**

(Knopf, 1994)

**The Perfect Place**

(Knopf, 1989)

another. I was certain the thirteen of you would remain the best of friends.

Sheila, who always tried hard and has surely read the phrase in a book, says, "As close as a hand in a glove." We raise our eyebrows slightly, and we are all tempted to contradict her. In an instant she has touched on the reason we have been avoiding one another for so long.

"Despite the worst tragedy, life and desire somehow continue," Kohler says. The degree to which death and desire coexist and the determination of life to continue furnish more than enough irony for the writer willing to see and make use of them. Denial is a product of fear. Facing that fear or, in the case of this author, re-creating the experience behind it can provide catharsis. We have only to live through it again to begin the process of healing. As the women in *Cracks* gather for a final reunion, the narrator explains:

*We see Fiamma, our dead sister, our wild girlhood, our lost dreams. We watch her, so slow and languorous on land, cutting through the water, leading the way with easy, strong strokes. Then we clamber, naked, up the bank, and the sun dips behind the wattles.*

The sinners emerge from the water, cleansed and renewed, but not without memories or remorse. The effect is bittersweet, as is the guilt of the survivors: lucky to still be alive, wiser, but also damaged by the experience.

Kohler truly may think of herself as a survivor. When discussing her work, she often makes reference to a single event that transformed her life forever: the murder of her sister. "I have tried to write about my sister's death again and again—there are lost girls all through my work, lost in many ways—adolescence is a time of loss, I suppose ..." If the need to confront and understand is the lifeblood of her work, then the sense of lost youth and the violence with which it is sometimes taken away are the shadows cast by her diligence. Perhaps Kohler said it best when she wrote in *Cracks*, "We see ourselves in one another's sad eyes, relieved that this reunion has ended." Forgetting and the distance created by time are the only remedies for a tragedy of such life-altering proportions.

That Sheila Kohler continues to write, continues to wrestle with these issues, tells us the work is not over. Even when the healing is done, the scarring sometimes continues. ■

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