

# Short but they make their point

## THE BED BOOK OF SHORT STORIES

edited by Joanne Hichens  
*Modjaji Books*

## HOMING

Henrietta Rose-Innes  
*Umuzi*

## THE LINE LINE

Arja Salafranca  
*Modjaji Books*

## REVIEW:

### SHARON SOROUR-MORRIS

THERE'S no getting away from it: no matter how beautifully they're crafted or how keenly they're read, short stories are the orphans of the literary world.

Always at a disadvantage, they have to fight hard and pack a punch to engage their readers. I've always found them inviting, though, and the Saki stories I read as a school-girl still swirl in my head.

To my delight there are suddenly three South African anthologies to relish. And they're a compelling triumvirate.

The most ambitious, and intriguing, is *The Bed Book of Short Stories* published by Colleen Higgs's Modjaji Books and edited by Joanne Hichens. Loosely linked by the bed as a central theme, which Higgs describes as an ordinary object with "potential to yield rich metaphor", these stories by women from southern Africa are textured and varied.

While I personally prefer one-author anthologies for their continuity and fluidity of form and vision, this very African offering has a lot going for it. From the memorable to the macabre, the 30 stories are inevitably about sleep, sex and sickness.

Some stories sparkle with wit, others are wracked with trauma and pain. Some perhaps needed tighter editing, others beg for sharper

proof-reading, many are word-perfect.

Many deserve a mention but as I can highlight only a sprinkling, my choice falls on Helen Walne's *Crazy*, Rosemund Handler's *Lena My Lovely*, Liesl Jobson's *On a Broomstick*, Jayne Bauling's *Stains Like a Map*, Hichens's *Good Night*, *Sleep Tight* and another of her stories, *Bedrock*. Generally speaking, though, this collection is unique and makes for compelling bedside reading.

Arja Salafranca's *Desire, with Borders* – about a woman navigating the tricky terrain of lust and love – is also included in her collection, *The Thin Line*.

Sharp, edgy and nuanced, Salafranca's stories are fresh and convincing, if sometimes a little rough around the edges. She admits to falling in love with the short-story form while studying literature at university, where she devoured the work of a diverse band of writers from Gordimer to Atwood. "I love the fact that you can read a whole world in a few pages, and then move on to the next world," she said in a recent interview.

But the stand-out collection is Henrietta Rose-Innes's *Homing*, which was bought on auction by Umuzi.

I haven't read Rose-Innes for years, not since her literary debut, *Shark's Egg*, was launched about a decade ago and JM Coetzee used words such as "taut" and "clean" to describe her prose.

The stories in *Homing* are not all new. Many of them have appeared in other anthologies and have garnered praise and awards. The startling *Poison* – about a young woman's growing isolation as she runs out of petrol on the outskirts of the city as Cape Town is engulfed in a toxic cloud after a chemical explosion – won the 2007 PEN Award and the 2008 Caine Prize. More recently, *Falling* was the 2010 Willesden Prize runner-up.

Gems most of them, they've been honed by a writer who confesses to being neurotic about reworking her words. "Revision is a never-ending process, I am never content," she says. And, this time, her writing has also been buffed by expert editor Martha Evans. The results are impressive.

Rose-Innes describes herself as a "visual thinker". Her imaginative story ideas are triggered by interesting objects or locations: she finds buildings fascinating and is transfixed by the way a city transforms – and is transformed by – its inhabitants.

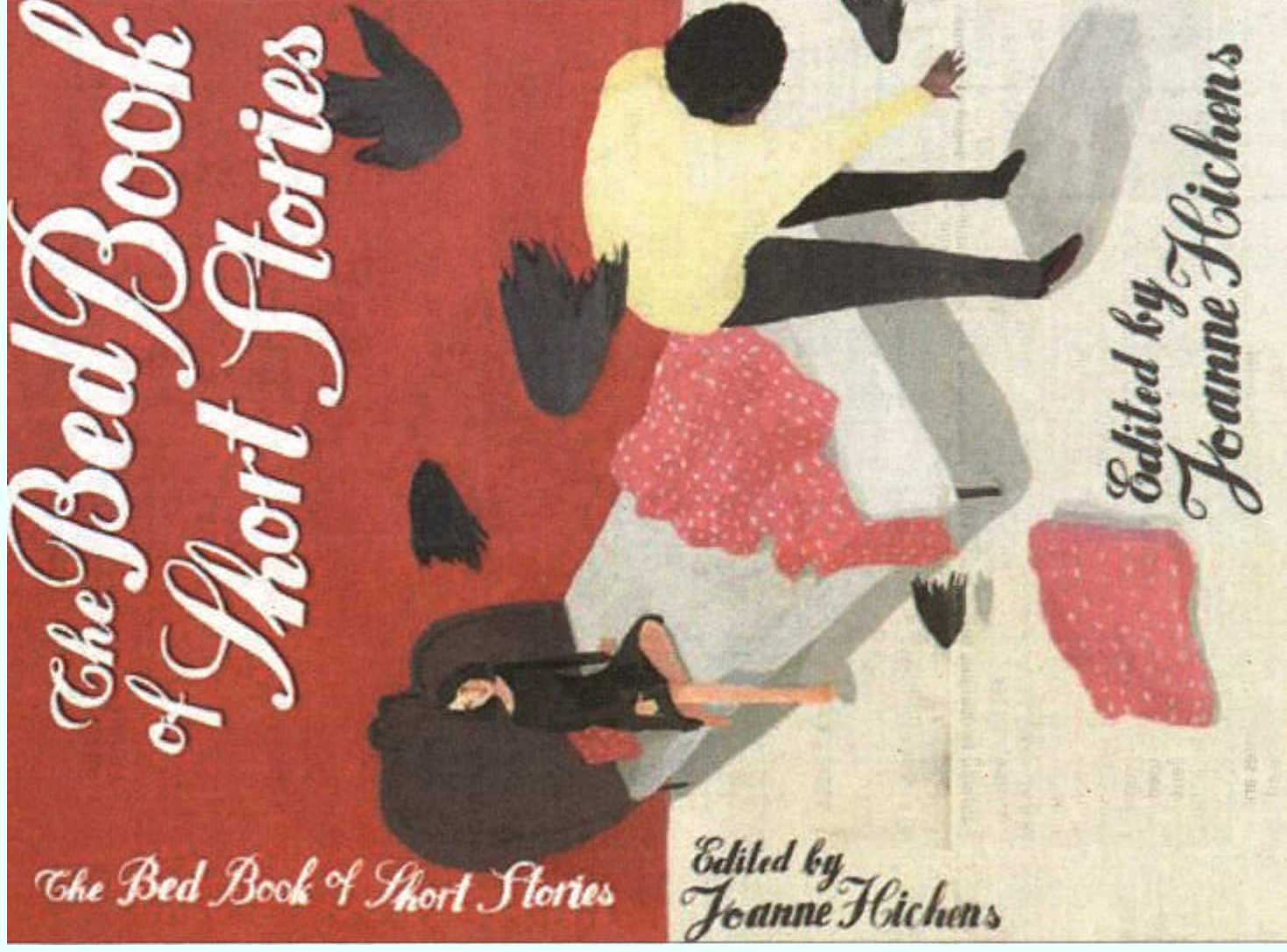
As the name suggests, the concepts of "homing", of leaving and coming home, of making a home, of defining and owning a certain space, are the main themes of the collection. And as she points out, "It's appropriate that Cape Town, my own home, is the centre around which these stories are arranged."

All these elements combine to form cogent stories that grip the reader. Propelled by superb storylines which explore the city in all its diversity, they contain vivid imagery and well-wrought characters.

One of my favourites, *Unknown Soldier* is the tight, tense tale of a little boy – dropped off at the city-centre public library by his narcissistic mother every Saturday – who unwittingly becomes embroiled in the thrilling escape of a street child being chased by knife-wielding pursuers.

Then there's the enigmatic *Falling*, with its simple, yet striking, opening line: "Victor selects a square of glass and touches it with his palms". The protagonist's obsession with climbing the glassed dome of a suburban shopping mall is cleverly juxtaposed with a building-site experience he had as a child.

*Promenade* is about the unlikely connection a Sea Point resident (who speed-walks at 6pm sharp along the



Sea Point seawall every day) strikes up with a boxer on his exercise route. You can smell the sea, hear the shrieking gulls. Like many of the other stories in this collection, it's evocative and enthralling and, like *The Bed Book* and *The Thin Line*, a welcome addition to the local literary landscape. ● Sorour-Morris is assistant editor of *DRUM* magazine and author of the recently published memoir *Something on my mind*. Kate Jowell – A Battle with Alzheimer's (Zebra Press).