

The sweep of Change

Henrietta Rose-Innes speaks to
Maureen Isaacson about her latest novel

HENRIETTA Rose-Innes has been hailed as a consummate practitioner of the short story craft, by the critic Craig McKenzie and others, and last year's publication of her short story collection *Homings* was widely acclaimed. She had after all won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2008 and the 2007 South African PEN Award for short stories.

Her debut novel, *Shark's Egg* (2000), heralded a new voice which JM Coetzee welcomed into the "the new literature". This mysterious and detailed exploration of school-girl friendship and the subterranean inner realms propelling relationship and identity was to provide a foretaste of the unconventional ways in which Rose-Innes was to challenge her readers. *The Rock Alphabet* (2004), which the critic Michiel Heyns said was "a complex novel, deftly introducing what becomes an intriguing exploration of human structures of meaning as imposed upon natural things". He said it was a novel he wished to savour.

In *Nineveh*, the city of Cape Town apparently inspires a deeper communion with nature and history in the narrator. The multi-dimensional novel recalls Italo Calvino's beautiful, challenging and descriptive novel, *Invisible Cities*. Marco Polo on his return from his travels, visits the Kublai Kahn, describing many cities. These are, in the end, one city, possibly Venice, in a variety of its magnificent aspects, fantastical and real. It is a place of possibility where spiders create their own cities. Such delicacy is evident in *Nineveh*, where the architecture is finely spun, amid the ugliness of urban life that is in transformation and dissolution, an unequal

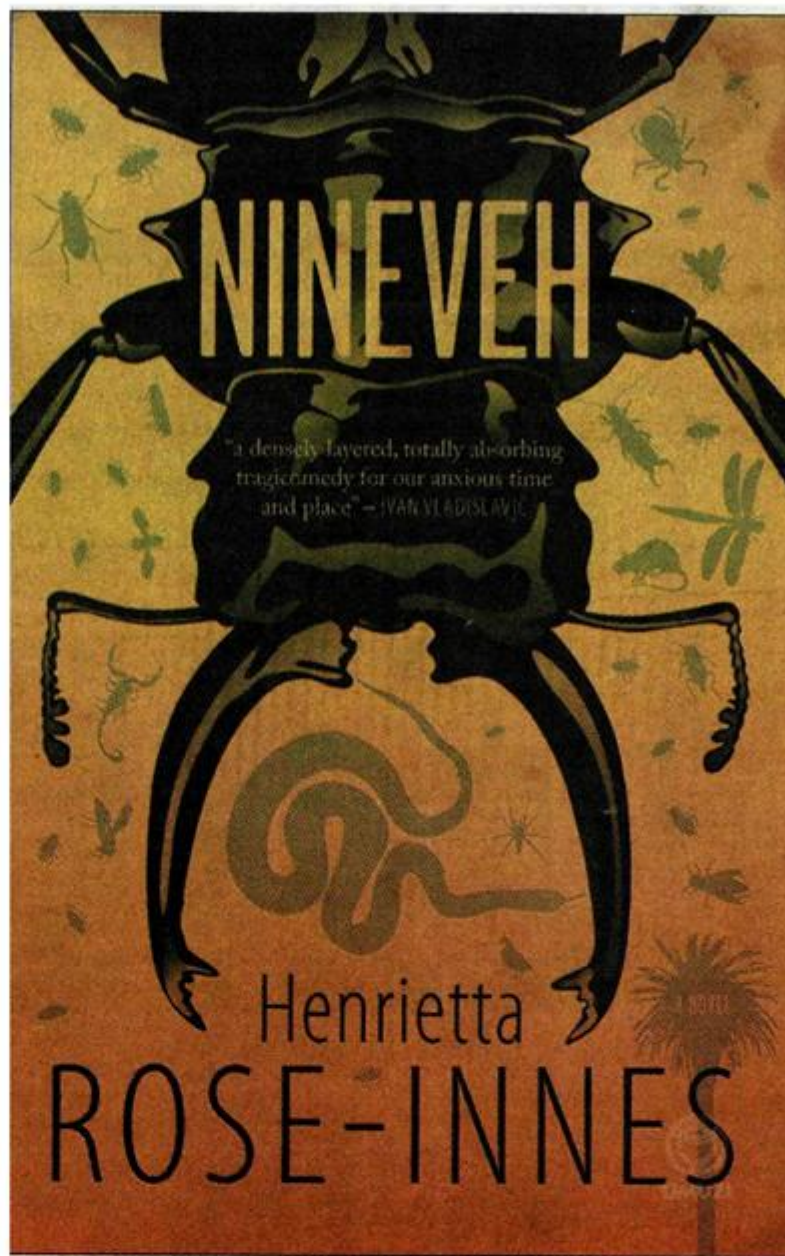
society which offers no place for the itinerant protagonist, Katya Grubbs, the proprietor of Painless Pest Relocations, a humane exterminator business.

Katya is consistent in her "gentle, rescue and cleansing" approach to her work, in contrast to the brutal methods of her father, also an exterminator, with whom she has experienced a quite violent relationship and who appears in her life again, adding a further layer of complexity to this stunning portrayal of shifting realities. His presence makes it easier to understand the emotional displacement in her life, her lack of connection in relationship, reflecting the larger displacement experienced by the inhabitants of the city.

Rose-Innes was one of a panel, "New Writing in the City" which I chaired at the Mail and Guardian Literary Festival, with Cynthia Jele, author of *Love is a Four Letter Word* and Jassie McKenzie, author of *Worst Case*. These are the answers to some of the questions we discussed.

What is the meaning of the title, *Nineveh* and what is the relationship of *Nineveh* to Cape Town? What is the statement you are making about the present by presenting us with a city that harks back to the beginning of time?

The novel is partly about how cities change, how they rise and fall. It felt right to give a nod to one of the oldest human cities, fabled for its destruction. In the Old Testament, *Nineveh* is described as a city once proud and "rejoicing", now utterly brought down: abandoned and inhabited only by wild creatures. It's a powerful image of old places being put to new uses, by new inhabitants, in unexpected ways – a



theme in the novel.

I don't think *Nineveh* is an apocalyptic story. I wanted it to be about the inevitability of change and transience – something that Katya, my protagonist, must come to accept in her own life.

When something is destroyed, some other order will be created, for good or bad. Where one building collapses into ruin, another rises up. Invoking the sweep of history implies the inevitability and cyclical nature of this process, and adds an epic dimension to Katya's own small story.

How does your novel explain the idea of transformation, the constant motion and change that takes place within a city?

All cities are in flux, and modern African cities are changing particularly rapidly. The idea of a stable, changeless environment can

be a nostalgic fantasy. It is a source of acute anxiety when our accustomed environment, the familiar landscape of our past, is revealed to be fragile. However, stasis is oppressive – as South Africans know only too well – and change brings possibility.

I am very drawn to writing about buildings, particularly ruined, abandoned and repurposed ones. Part of the appeal is the contradictory double nature of these places: solid and fragile, permanent and transient.

I love the idea of discovering unexpected dimensions to the known world.

What is the meaning of the beasts Katya must destroy? Are they symbolic of the dangers in cities, the violence and pestilence that people seek to have exterminated or are you making a

statement about environmental degradation?

Katya's self-appointed role is not so much to eradicate but to sort out urban pest infestations – "putting the wild back in the wild, keeping the tame tame". There is a human tendency to categorise, to seek order in chaos: an urge that is intense in times of uncertainty. But entropy cannot be defeated, and Katya, despite her best intentions, is herself a chaotic force. Her plans to establish a niche for herself in the pristine grounds of *Nineveh* (the housing estate) come to nothing, and indirectly she ends up bringing destruction down on the place and its inhabitants.

The animals in the book are not imagined as "others" in opposition to humans. They are part of a complex city ecosystem. I wanted to evoke a sense of multitudinous beings occupying urban spaces – human and non-human, symbiotic, parasitic or mutually oblivious. Katya herself identifies strongly with the "beasts". In many ways, she sees herself as one more lowly creature, struggling to make a place for itself in the urban wilderness.

Ivan Vladislavic says on the cover *Nineveh* is a tragicomedy. How funny is the world you describe?

I was trying for an element of absurdity: many images and scenarios in *Nineveh* are a little grotesque or caricature-ish.

One understanding of humour is that it relies on incongruity: the juxtaposition of disparate things, the unexpected bursting through into the known. This is what makes us laugh. (In one slapstick scene, a large man in a business suit falls through the floor.)

Of course, incongruity is also the basis for the surreal, the shocking, the uncanny.

Waking up one morning to find that your environment has changed utterly around you is frightening – but it can also be read as comic. In this way, humour is a consolation in an uncertain world. It can take a fear of the unknown and transform it into something lighter. I suppose that's one of the things I was trying to achieve in the writing of *Nineveh*.

● *Nineveh* is published by Umuzi (R180).

● *Henrietta Rose-Innes and Madeleine Miller (author of The Song of Achilles, reviewed below)* will be among the writers appearing at Cape Town's International Open Book Fair from September 21-September 25