

Beauty in the beastliest places

NINEVEH

Henrietta Rose-Innes
Umuzi

REVIEW: Ken Barris

WHAT can a reviewer say about a tale of a pest remover?

A bald summary of Rose-Innes's third novel, *Nineveh*, will reveal that this pest remover is engaged by a property developer to get rid of an infestation in one of his housing estates.

The suitably named Katya Grubbs is a humane remover of vermin, persuading them to go elsewhere rather than resorting to poison.

She has a difficult relationship with her father, Len Grubbs, a pest eradicator (and human being) of the more toxic kind, and an uncomfortable relationship with her sister.

She is surprisingly attracted to the property developer in question, Mr Brand.

As a sub-plot, excavation for a property development across the road from her own home destabilises the surrounding area and damages neighbouring properties, her own included.

While this is not an unfair synopsis, it does not indicate what a delightful novel Rose-Innes has worked out of her offbeat material. *Nineveh* is not only about people, it is also about spaces. A good starting point is Nineveh itself, the upmarket housing estate in Noordhoek that Katya is hired to defend against its small, glittering invaders.

At first it strikes her as an immaculate and moneyed zigurat, a residential zone marked by clean lines and pleasing geometric arrangements. She stays in the staff quarters for a few days to assess the nature and extent of the infestation. Being there is a

relief for her, in view of its contrast with her shabby, decaying home.

As she moves through the imperious architecture, however, she discovers the instability of its boundaries. Nineveh is progressively infiltrated not only by the organic world – the flora and fauna of the neighbouring wetlands, insects, frogs, moulds and fungi, and eventually water itself – but also by human neighbours.

These are residents of a nearby informal settlement, who provide a conduit for the sale of its pilfered building materials, tiling and tubing, electrical wiring. And there is another human invader whose presence turns out to be more threatening to Katya by far, namely her own egregious and long-absent father.

At a metaphoric level, the instability of building and space reflects the havoc wreaked by Len Grubbs on Katya's family, on her own life and past. Instability comes closer to home for her, literally. As the park across the road from her own house is excavated to make way for another property development, the foundations of her house are shaken, and the property begins to crack open.

This would be a disaster for most, but Katya is uniquely equipped to deal with it, no doubt because she is a Len Grubbs survivor.

She feels at home in a world which shifts and changes, in which distinctions are lost and borders fail. It does not upset her to plunge into a swamp, or be overrun by a swarm of beetles, or to stick her hands into muck. To describe her as a citizen of chaos rather than a resident of order is accurate enough, though it cannot explain the charm with which she falls through her ever-changing, sometimes dissolv-

Small heroes creep through the text, gleam with humour...

ing world. Nor can it explain the understated beauty of her perceptions, which, of course, are Rose-Innes's own.

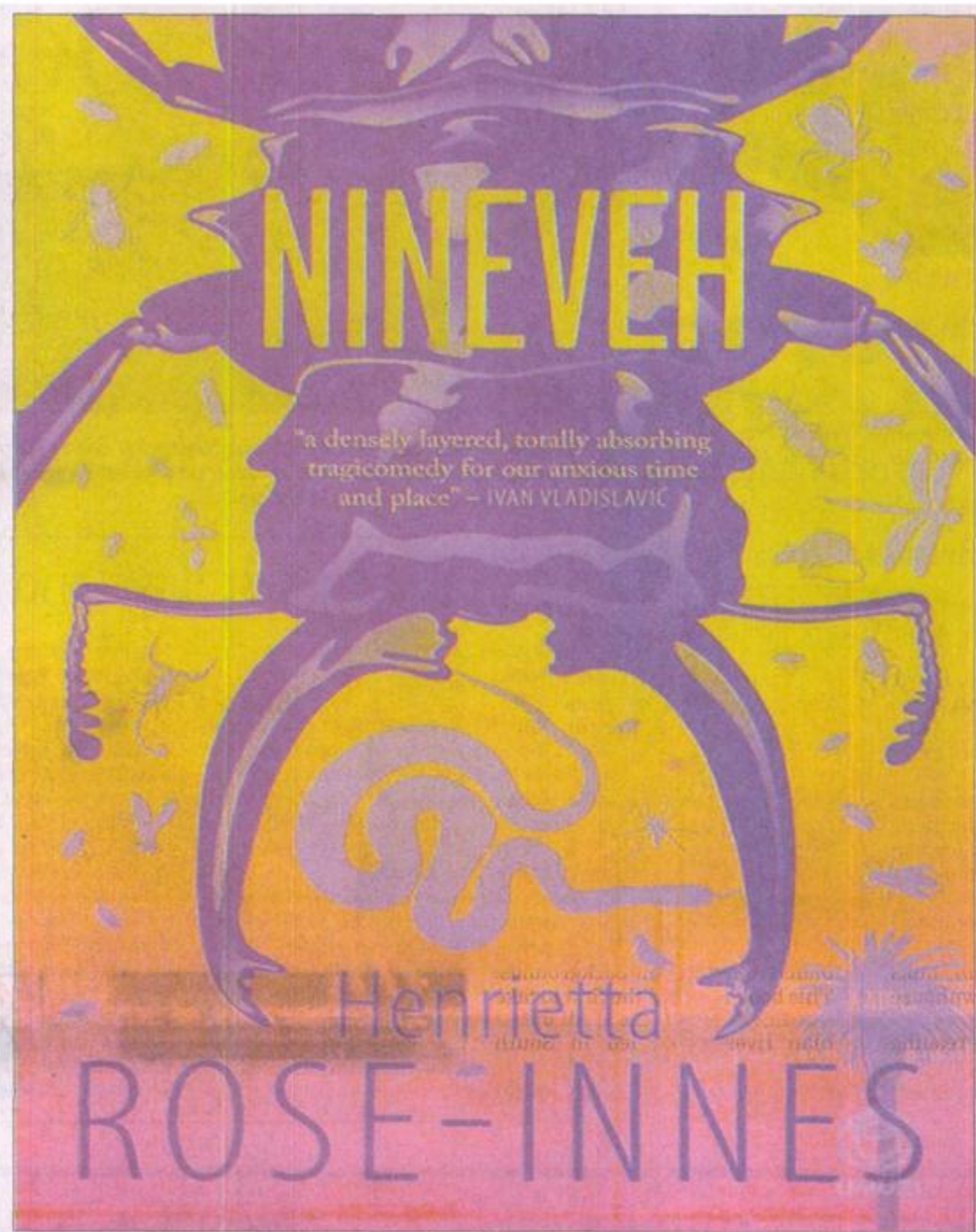
Katya cannot avoid seeing beauty, and there is visual poetry everywhere unsuspected: in dirt and displaced matter, in failing buildings, in sidelined people.

The charm of Katya's perceptions is intimately linked with the suppleness of Rose-Innes's prose. Each sentence is balanced and musical, though there are occasional colloquialisms that leave surprising puncture holes in the smooth skin of the text. I found myself reading paragraphs aloud to enjoy their fluency and aural coherence.

What impressed me most about *Nineveh*, however, is Rose-Innes's vision of various Cape Towns that are juxtaposed, superimposed, and yet barely visible to each other. The exploration of place, of urban space in particular, is not new in post-apartheid fiction, particularly as it turns away from direct political involvement.

It is true that a number of writers have explored how caste and class are contained or spilt by the built environment, or how the seams of the past are visible today in the streets of Cape Town and Johannesburg.

The originality of *Nineveh* lies in the way it honours the small people and small animals of the built and natural city, and demonstrates their power, refusing to treat anyone



as a tragic subject or object of pity.

This focus on the small and irreducible is highlighted by the contrasting – and unpredictable – destiny of Mr Brand, the single wealthy and conven-

tionally powerful figure in the novel. The small heroes, Katya herself, Len Grubbs, even the caterpillars and metallic longhorn beetles that creep through the text shine with iridescent toughness

and gleam with humour.

● Barris is a writer, critic and researcher, and works at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. His new novel, *Life Underwater*, will be released by Kwela next year.