

Sharp insights, subtlety, humour and compassion



AN IMPERFECT BLESSING
Nadia Davids
Umuzi

REVIEW: Genna Gardini

AT THE beginning of *An Imperfect Blessing*, author Nadia Davids quotes Rustum Kozaini's poem *The Blessing*: "And somewhere also the children/ who laugh and play as if untouched by history/ or by the heavy hands of their parents' gods."

Davids, who in her acknowl-

edgments describes *An Imperfect Blessing* as a response of sorts to Kozaini's poem, investigates similar ideas of liminality and heritage in her debut novel.

Davids is an award-winning writer and, like most South African drama students, I studied her play *At Her Feet* – in which she contemplates Cape Town Muslim women's myriad identities – while at university.

Considering *An Imperfect Blessing*, I was struck, once again, by how the writer care-

fully captures in-between spaces in South Africa, in terms of geography, history, identifications and relationships.

The book's protagonist, Alia Dawood, is a 14-year-old girl living in Walmer Estate with her parents, who she finds both perplexingly separate from and annoyingly familiar to her, and her sister, who functions as a social aspiration and gatekeeper.

The notion that the personal is political, which many may argue has become something of



The notion that the personal is political, which many argue is a cliché, retains its relevance

a cliché over the years, in its relevance in this which describes the turn both historical legacies political change as they against the lives and relationships of the Dawood family. The novel is split over timelines and part of it is that it compares transitoriness of adolescence to South Africa in 1993. In *An Imperfect Blessing* both Alia and the character on the brink of changes. Her Uncle Waleed, the

Why I left medical profession

POSTMORTEM: THE DOCTOR WHO WALKED AWAY

Maria Phalime
Tafelberg

REVIEW: Dawn Garisch

"... I HAD little time to listen to my patients... I worked in a very pressurised environment and was forced to strip away the colour in the stories of patients' lives in order to get to the black and white of science and fact."

This book should have been written a while ago. It took a brave young woman to write this – one who decided to stand up to the inner and outer critical voices that demand we accept what is unacceptable. When I finished reading it, I burst into tears.

I myself have written about abusive conditions in the health sector and *Postmortem* again roused my anger and frustration.

We know so much about improving health, yet there are many systemic obstructions preventing the ill and injured from receiving even basic help.

I cried for the immense suffering that results from mismanagement of systems and resources, and for a situation that is getting worse as doctors, afraid for their own mental and physical health, walk away from medicine.

Twenty years ago, I also walked away, not from medicine, but from abusive and counterproductive working conditions in the state sector.

Maria Phalime grew up in Soweto. Her dream of becoming a doctor was fuelled by her brother's and father's early deaths and the desire to make a difference.

She was only accepted into medicine after completing a BSc degree. On qualifying, she was hor-

rified to discover how bad conditions were outside the teaching hospital circuit.

Poorly resourced facilities, ill patients who were discharged prematurely to make room for the next intake, and the enormous pressure under which doctors worked to get through everyone who needed to be seen, making critical decisions when they were too exhausted to think straight.

No time to reflect, nor to debrief, no time even to act compassionately to a patient in distress when there are so many more waiting their turn.

Maria didn't like the person she was becoming. After four years, she gave up medicine and moved into destination marketing, despite being offered an excellent medical post.

For the next ten years, Maria struggled with feelings of self-doubt and self-recrimination.

One day she put pen to paper to explore the complex issues involved. *Postmortem* is the result of her courageous inquiry into herself and the healthcare system.

Do the qualities that get students into medical school make for good doctors?

Could she have been better equipped to deal with the harsh realities of health care? Is it a good or bad thing that newly qualified doctors in understaffed situations are forced to perform procedures they are not trained to do?

Is medicine the only way to make an impact on improving people's quality of life?

When should doctors bump up their resilience, when should they protest, and when should they walk away? Was her inability to continue practicing medicine a personal failure?

Attempting to answer this last question, Maria interviews

some doctors who have left medicine and a psychiatrist on the stresses that medical practitioners face in the field. She discovered that her difficulties were not unique.

The culture of coping and resilience is deeply entrenched in the medical profession. It starts early on in our training – the hours, the workload, the exposure to gruesome pathology and trauma.

Dr Harrison referred to them as "rituals of induction and brutalisation"... Shutting down and pushing through is often the most expedient way to cope.

Postmortem blows the whistle on the sometimes inhumane conditions in facilities meant to provide relief and care.

Why don't doctors draw more attention to this state of affairs?

One reason is that doctors are among the most privileged members of our society. How can we complain when the patients suffer so much more, and the nurses and cleaners working alongside us are paid so much less?

I spoke to colleagues who work in the state sector, and there are pockets where dedicated health careers achieved much with very little.

It is heart-warming and shocking when I hear how three young doctors doing community service re-opened a hospital and used their own vehicles to transport the desperately ill and injured.

Yet the system is run through with fault lines that we ignore to the detriment of our whole society.

It remains to be seen whether the proposed National Health Insurance will find viable ways to address these urgent issues.

I hope this book is a catalyst for change, and that it falls into



the hands and hearts of the policymakers and doctors in healthcare forums.

We must object where patients are too sick and too poor to do so.

● Garisch is author, general practitioner and active method facilitator.