

Love in a turbulent Zimbabwe

Poppie Mphuthing talks to Irene Sabatini, author of the award-winning new novel, *The Boy Next Door*

On the cusp of its independence in 1980, Zimbabwe was the breadbasket of Africa, boasting one of the highest literacy rates on the continent. But in the past decade the economy has collapsed, agricultural production has plummeted, and political repression has become the order of the day. For many Zimbabweans, there was little to celebrate on the country's 30th anniversary of independence from British colonial rule in April this year.

The unfolding tragedy of Zimbabwe is the backdrop of *The Boy Next Door*, the debut novel of Zimbabwe-born Irene Sabatini, whose candid and heartfelt narrative has earned her international recognition.

In June, she won the Orange Award for New Writers, one of Britain's most prestigious literary prizes. "The emphasis of the Orange Award for New Writers is on emerging talent and the evidence of future potential," says the official website. The judges' chair, Di Spiers, describes Sabatini's novel as "an important book... immediately engaging, vivid and buzzing with energy... that will enchant readers and which marks the emergence of a serious new talent."

Speaking with Sabatini over the phone, her bemusement and surprise at receiving the award are hard to miss. "It was out of leftfield. Having that affirmation and acknowledgement that you are a storyteller is so special. I haven't been bluffing..." She laughs musically, something she does throughout the conversation.

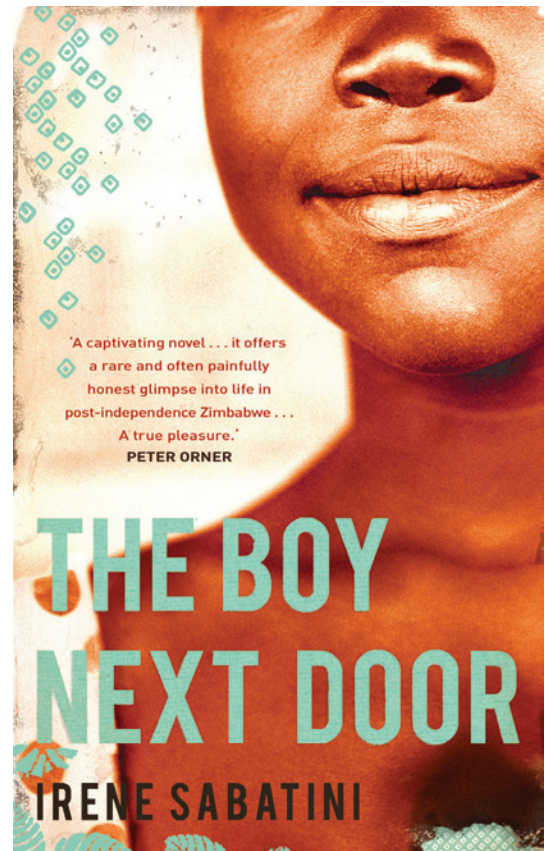
Sabatini, who lives in Switzerland with

her husband and children, has come a long way since her childhood days in Bulawayo, where she was born and brought up. Now 40, Sabatini has lived all over the world. She spent her university years in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, as well as spending time in London (UK) and Bogotá (Columbia).

In many ways *The Boy Next Door* is a full-circle memoir, a nostalgic trip down memory lane, back to the heady time when Zimbabwe first gained independence and black people took pride and ownership of their space.

These observations and experiences are shared with the reader by the protagonist and narrator, Lindiwe Bishop. A character, Sabatini says, that she has a great deal in common with. Many of Lindiwe's experiences are autobiographical details. Sabatini says they share many characteristics, and: "Like me,

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Lindiwe loves reading. Actually she's a bookworm, but is always observing the world around her."

The Boy Next Door traces the blossoming of an unlikely relationship between Lindiwe, a young mixed-race girl and her twenty-something white next-door neighbour, Ian McKenzie. Sabatini says Ian was created from a mosaic of memories of young Rhodesian boys she grew up with in Bulawayo. Many of them were racist and taunted her, as she was the only black person at her youth group. But despite this hurtful experience, she does not construct Ian as a one-

Books

African literature



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as a partner to Lindiwe, as a father to their son David, and as a professional. “He’s a Rhodie, but different,” says Sabatini. “He’s isolated from his own community. He’s poor white trash but he has an artistic, sensitive side.”

The narrative entwines fictional episodes with historical political

events and figures. Sabatini hangs race politics and contemporary history on a number of fictional episodes. One instance is Ian’s discovery of and growing love affair with photography, which sees him head to State House at the request of President Robert Mugabe, to shoot the latter’s portrait. Sabatini reflects that this is an important episode in the book. “We are complex, multidimensional characters. Every dictator has a humanity to them,” she says.

Stoicism is a constant feature in *The Boy Next Door*. It is displayed by the Bishop family, whose fabric is challenged by infidelity. Lindiwe and Ian’s relationship also embodies stoicism in the face of other people’s prejudices.


Even their individual worldviews and histories put pressure on their nuclear family. When their son David arrives home with a black eye, having been targeted in a racially-motivated attack, the family once again has to face racism head on. The literal divide of black and white challenges the couple’s intimate bond. Lindiwe’s frustration and Ian’s lack of understanding pushes their relationship to the brink. They are a microcosm of the many challenges facing the post-colonial Zimbabwe they live in.

The notion of ‘the boy next door’ is widely seen as an imagined, optimistic image of the perfect love. Sabatini’s novel embodies this and yet simultaneously removes the rose-tinted effect, by positing love in the inglorious light in which it often thrives.

Stoicism plays out more generally too, as a post-independent Zimbabwe strives to unravel the endemic racism of the society and keep in check the excesses of the new black political elite. A sense of foreboding peppers the narrative as the post-liberation society tries to find its way, but ultimately the accompanying tensions reach boiling point.

In light of Zimbabwe’s descent into political and economic turmoil, some readers may view the author’s attitude as unrealistic and oblivious to current realities. But Sabatini is unapologetic. “*The Boy Next Door* was not supposed to be about race and politics,” she says. “Writing the book was an organic process... It’s a celebration of the character of Zimbabwe and how it was. I have a deep love and optimism for Zimbabwe. I have very fond memories.”

Although Sabatini says she didn’t set out to write a novel that espouses particular ideologies about politics and race, these issues are almost inescapable, as the constant backdrop against which the protagonists’ lives play out. But what is clear is that for Sabatini, writing *The Boy Next Door* was therapeutic. “To write that book, I had to be out of Zimbabwe. I had to have peace of mind for the memories to come floating to the surface.”

Sabatini is currently working on her second novel, although she is tight-lipped about the details. She does, however, say that her next offering explores similar dynamics as in *The Boy Next Door*. So, those who enjoy the complex nature of families and social history, watch this space. 

dimensional hateful character. Sabatini says, “Ian is a mystery... He’s open to change. He’s also a realist. He confronts who he is and seeks to change. Ultimately he has a good heart.”

Something special about Ian’s spirit saves him from his own social history, which tells him he should be a racist, patriarchal pillar of Rhodesian society. In the book there is constant reference to Ian’s engrained racist attitudes. He often uses derogatory terms like ‘Gondie’, ‘Aff’ and ‘curry-muncher’, but as the years go by his consciousness awakens. It is his relationship with Lindiwe that enables this. She is the first person of colour with whom he interacts and connects. He inadvertently comes to respect and love her.

“They come from the same place. They have an understanding. They are both dealing with coming from a small, boring place. They share common ground,” says Sabatini.

This observation shows that human beings are more similar than we are different, and that in times of external conflict and pressure human resolve can achieve beyond its own expectation.

Sabatini’s optimism is evident as the narrative traces how Ian matures