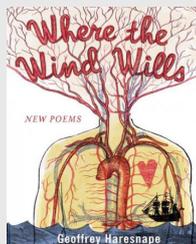




# His-story, her-story, their-story – ours

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Where the wind wills

**Book Cover:**



**Author:**  
Geoffrey Haresnape

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**Review Title:**  
His-story, her-story, their-story – ours

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There are 40 poems in this sometimes whimsical, frequently elegiac, book. Haresnape has arranged the poems into 'five numbered sections' (I quote from his Preface), based on their 'subject matter and forms'. He feels that the only section in need of explanation is Section III, because the poems therein 'emanate from two named *personae*, Erasmus Eyeball ... [and] the acerbic and pedantic Dr Severance Package' (p. viii). Both of these *personae* or heteronyms (in the Pessoa sense) are fine social satirists who add enjoyable doses of humour to the book. The other sections of the book, as does Gail Dendy's *Closer than that* (2011), require the reader to determine the logic behind their partitioning. As with Dendy's book, the reasons are not that obvious, as the same types of poems are to be found in all sections. The sections provide spaces within which the poems might develop, and might be seen as different chambers or 'stanzas', whose significance will emerge as the poems grow in the reader's own mind. To give a sense of the contents of the book, at least, one might hazard an overview (abbreviated, inadequate) of the content of the different sections. The first, then, deals with memories of places and people in the Cape Peninsula. The second combines social commentary with historical vision and placement. The third, as indicated above, is social satire, giving voice, perhaps, to what we would like to say, but are too polite to do so. The fourth, comprises elegies (including one for Keats [in memoriam Stephen Watson, who died in 2011]) and travel pieces. The final section, which returns to the Cape Peninsula, is also elegiac in tone, perhaps more personal than the previous, and with poems of shorter line length taking up much of the space.

The book is noteworthy for its precise and plain language, and its low-keyed technical skill. The writing is technically sparse, but always accessible, always engaging. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the social satire, which is not just present in Section III. Take this extract from 'The Rumpus Yesteryear', from Section IV, with its mock-classical allusions to *The Iliad*, and, probably, the recent movies inspired by it:

The avengers are ashore  
and camping outside the city:  
their sleeping tents, camp kitchens, pit latrines  
an instant slum.  
They're in your face,  
ready to commit mayhem,  
to be as nasty as possible,  
trading blows for blows. (p. 69)

The zesty tone and contemporary images almost turn Homer into melodrama. But this is a fresh take on the father of Western literature, which makes him or her, our contemporary, as we see in the conclusion to the poem: 'These are his-story, her-story, their-story, / ours' (p. 70). This is hardly a new strategy, if one thinks of the remarkable variations on Homer in Christopher Logue's *War Music*, where chariots become sports cars, for instance, and the syntax and lexicon quiver with passion, but the quotidian simplicity of Haresnape's approach has its own particular pathos.

His singular note (not his single note) is humour, wonderfully present in such throw-away socio-linguistic satirical barbs as the following, where none are spared:

... 'outage' is so politically correct,  
like 'educator' and 'learner',  
'levelling the playing field',  
and 'people on the ground.'  
In the *circumstances*,  
only a formerly-advantaged  
like Colonel Ffartt-Tremberly  
of 'Fantasy Forest,' Constantia,  
would have the gall to express this sentiment:  
'By Gad, Sir. An outage is an outrage.'  
People will say:



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'That whitey has a *problelem* ...' ('Cross-currents in the Brain of Dr Severance Package' pp. 40–43).

This is a book that should be read by young and old lovers of poetry, as it is the latest fruit of a fine South African creative author, who has been honing his skill for many years now, and who has much to teach us. He is one amongst a constellation

of poets which includes Chris Mann, Sidney Clouts, Mongane Serote, Stephen Watson, Patrick Cullinan (who also died in 2011), Breyten Breytenbach, Guy Butler, and Roy Campbell – inherently South African, I would say, yet always embracing a wider world of reference and affect, never afraid to criticise (where necessary), never reluctant to praise (when such is due).