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The Tortoise Cried its Only Tear by Carol Campbell

Jennifer de Klerk

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Jennifer de Klerk: The giant tortoises of the Karoo are more than 100 years old and said to hold the ancient knowledge of this arid land.

It is said they cry only one tear, on the day they die. Among the people of the Karoo, those who live closest to the earth, it is sacrilege to kill one.

The tortoise Boetie killed haunted Siena. Years later she remembered it when she raced terror-stricken on the dirt roads in the dark, her clothes splattered with blood.

Of course, she couldn't really blame Boetie. He was hungry and tortoises are good eating cooked slow in their shells over a fire. The forgotten waifs and strays of the Karoo were always hungry, living off the land and whatever food they could find.

Siena was a *karretjiekind*, (a cart child), her parents roamed the remote Karoo farms with a cart and donkeys looking for work. Wild Boetie was abandoned, left to survive as best he could. Then there was Kriekie whose hands were broken by bullies. One day his mother, who worked as a prostitute at the truck stops, left and never came back.

This is their story, told with compassion, perception and an immediacy that pulls you in from the start. The author speaks in the vernacular, with vivid descriptions and a obvious understanding of these people on the edge of society, who are lucky to own a blanket; to whom a cup of sweet coffee and a peanut butter sandwich are riches.

When Siena runs, she heads for Seekoegat Primary School, her haven, the only safe place she knows, but can even Aunt Esmé and the school menceer protect her from the revenge of the tortoise and the terrible thing she was forced to do?

Beautifully written, this is an arresting story of a people, a land and a way of life which is still very much part of South African society

The Tortoise Cried its Only Tear
 Carol Campbell
 Penguin/Random House (Umuzi)
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