

Carol Campbell discusses her new novel with Michele Magwood

The landscape of the Great Karoo becomes a character in itself and the writing is strewn with the magical, writes Michele Magwood of Carol Campbell's *The Tortoise Cried its Only Tear*

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BY MICHELE MAGWOOD



Carol Campbell's Karoo-novel gives precious insight into the margins of our land.
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The Tortoise Cried Its Only Tear *****
Carol Campbell, Umuzi, R240

Carol Campbell may now be living on the remote island of Shetland, off the northern tip of Britain, but her heart is buried deep in the Karoo.

It was here that she and her husband ran a petrol station near Prince Albert some years ago, and here that she set her first two novels, *My Children Have Faces* and *Esther's House*.

The first was a piercing story of the karretjiemense in the Karoo, an insight into the wretched, liminal folk who cross the landscape trailing dust clouds of poverty and hopelessness. *Esther's House* chronicled the appalling corruption of the government housing system in Oudtshoorn.

In *The Tortoise Cried its Only Tear* Campbell returns to the surrounds of Prince Albert. It opens in the present, with a young woman, Siena, running through the night towards her old school.

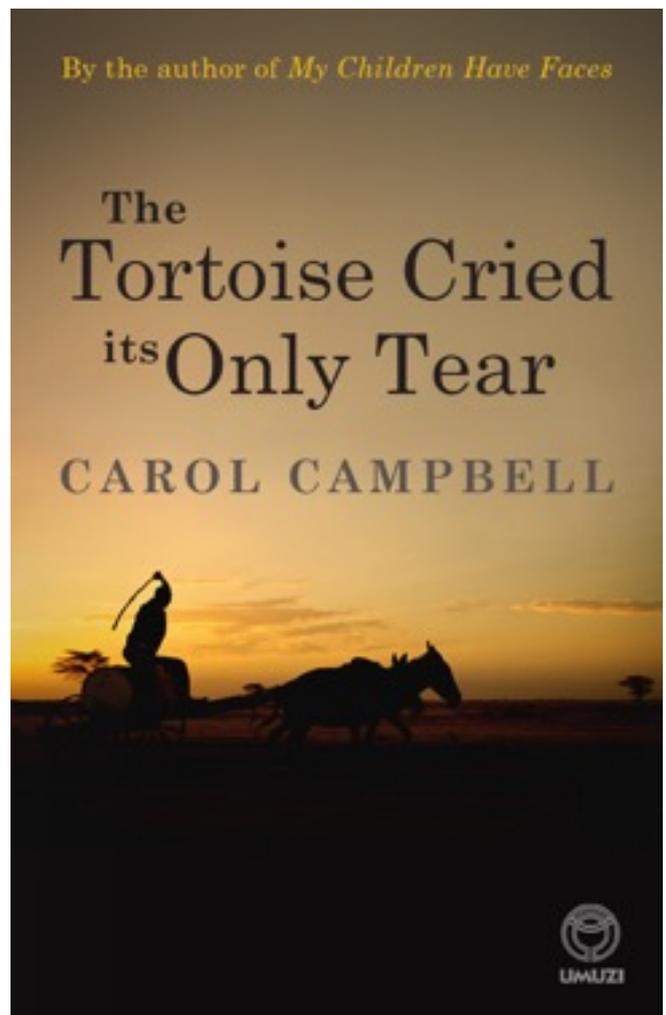
She is desperate, bloodied, but knows that when she reaches Seekoegat Primary School there will be someone to help. As we follow her punishing run, Campbell casts back to the events that set Siena on this path.

Writing from Shetland, she explains the evocative title of the book.

"It came from an old karretjieman in Leeu Gamka, who told me he was happy to eat road kill but not a tortoise. I had heard farm workers say that they would eat tortoise and that they were easy to cook because of their shell. But the old man was disgusted by this. He said his father had told him that tortoises carried a lot of knowledge in their old eyes and they should be left alone. They cried one tear, he said, and that was in the moment of death."

The first death comes swiftly in this story when a monstrous farmer is killed by a worker. The fallout ripples through the community, igniting fresh cycles of neglect and need that will metastasize into more violence. The one shining light is Siena, safely away at school with her hopes set on a proper education. Can she escape a poisoned legacy?

Campbell writes with a radiant humanity, compassionate but not sentimental, and if there is a thread through all three of her novels it is that of simple



kindness, that small acts of grace can have dramatic ramifications in the lives of the ignored and marginal.

In her years in the Karoo she witnessed hideous abuse in families and also what she calls "a helplessness, a disempowerment, that the karretjiemense, even as adults, could do nothing about when confronted with injustice".

"That is why in my books I use examples of how people in power - home affairs officials or teachers, or even a kitchen worker in a remote little school - can choose to be kind. This kindness carries tremendous power because it can affect a vulnerable person deeply and change their future. Children witness this and, maybe, just by being on the receiving end of humane treatment, they can become kinder people themselves."

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As before, the landscape of the Great Karoo becomes a character in itself and the writing is strewn with the magical.

There are mermaids who lurk in waterholes, threatening to pull children under and "Outa Dolos", a malevolent being with red coal eyes who lives in the river bed. As she runs, Siena is comforted by the presence of elders gone before her, but she is haunted too by the presence of an ancient tortoise she once failed to save.

Her father told her never to kill a tortoise because it has seen everything from the beginning of the world. If you eat a tortoise, he warned her, everything we know will be forgotten. Siena blames herself for her troubled predicament. "She had seen a tortoise's only tear, and afterwards everything had changed."

Campbell says the karretjiemense life is dying out. "Many are putting up shacks on the edges of the 'lokasies' but are unable to access resources because they have no birth certificates or any way of getting them." She's worried that their movement is being curtailed.

"In recent years city people have been buying farms and putting up game fences that make it impossible for animals and people to move easily over the ground. They are blocking ancient pathways and preventing access to old water points and stopping places. The fences are right up to the edge of the road. The karretjiemense have always used the 'langkampe' next to the roads for grazing and outspan, they've watered their donkeys at sheep troughs and springs but now as land ownership in the Karoo changes and old relationships with farmers disintegrate, they are being pushed out of the veld and left with nowhere to go."

As far away as she is from the Karoo, Campbell finds much similarity between that landscape and Shetland.

"The Karoo is ancient; it is vast and wild. People have lived there for thousands of years. When we moved to Shetland I found in the landscape and the people many similarities and felt that same peace. Here too are people who believe in the magical, living in a remote and rugged environment with wildlife on their doorstep." [@michelemagwood](#)

The Tortoise Cried its Only Tear is available in Afrikaans as Die Skilpad se Laaste Traan. Campbell will be at Woordfees in Stellenbosch between March 1 and 10.