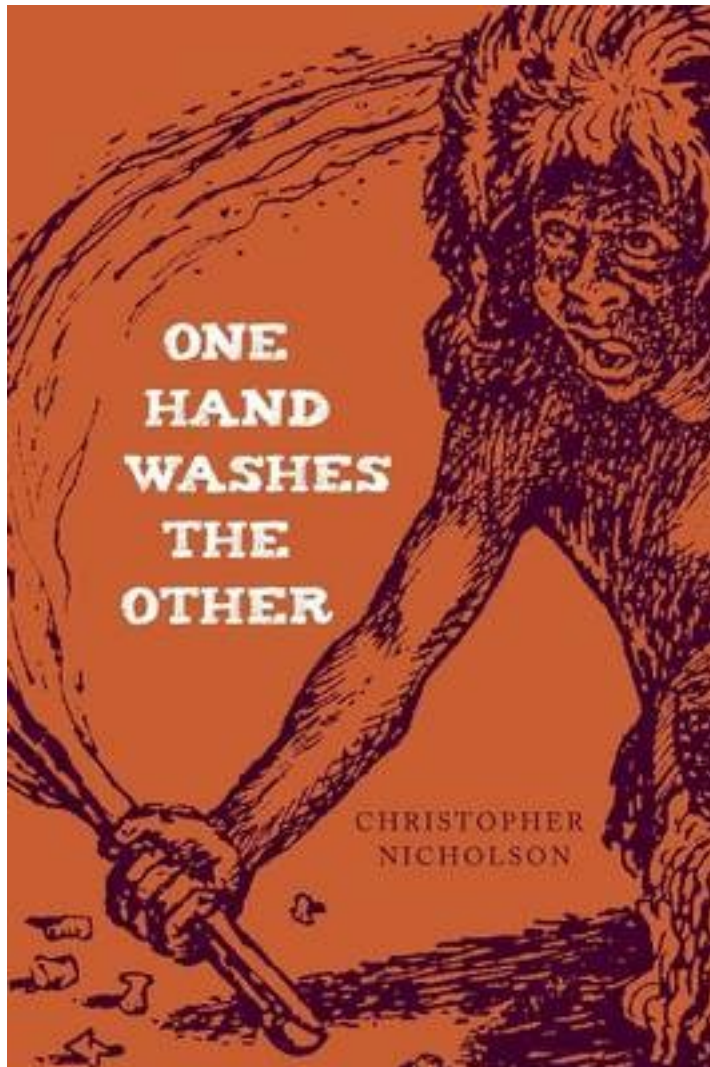


*By: Christopher Nicholson*

*Review by: Sarah Frost*



I found this novel quite engaging, although at times a little didactic. My main criticism would be that the author, Chris Nicholson, uses his themes and characters to 'preach' a moral philosophy about South African history and politics that makes his text overly rational (academic even), while distancing the readers from a sense of emotional authenticity. Consider for instance his concluding paragraph in which one of the characters, Father Zungu, claims: 'the glory of ubuntu was a love of humanity ... Free will was an inalienable right and would always be present. Virtue was not to be seen in isolation but had to be a means to an end, the end being happiness for all. Reason had to govern every aspect of our lives'. I feel the author could have made his plot, and character development bring his value system, albeit an admirable one, to life, rather than announcing it so ponderously.

This being said, however, I judge the novel as basically a successful one, evincing hard work and dedication on Nicholson's part, even if at times the writing is a little stiff, rehearsed, and at times implausible.

His themes are fascinating. Throughout the book author plays the idea of traditional African religion off against Western religion. His intricate descriptions of Zulu belief reveal a deep knowledge of this culture. Thandi Dladla, his protagonist, interacts with a sangoma, who advises her on how to find out more about the mysterious death of her father, a University professor who fought the Apartheid regime. Even the Catholic headmaster of the staunchly Christian Elmwood School where Thandi teaches, Father Zungu, bows to this same sangoma's authority in some matters. Wanting his soccer team to win against its main opponents very badly, he orders a potion from the sangoma and gives it to his team to drink. 'There was also a practical side to Father Zungu that evaluated the consequences of his gamble with black magic. What harm could come of it? If the concoctions worked then he would be the benefactor of its mysterious powers. If it failed then he would have to rely on Thandi Dladla and her theory'. Then there is Pumaphe Gumede, the villain of the story, who believes both in God and African traditional religion, deciding to attack Thandi who has blocked him in his political ambitions in the past, by referring to a quote from the Bible 'his eyes lit up when he looked at the book of Exodus Chapter 22 Verse 18. Now that was the sort of advice that made real sense ... 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'.

Nicholson's obsessive interest in left-brain/right-brain thinking and how this influences right-handedness/left-handedness structures this book in a big way. In fact, 'One Hand Washes The Other', is part of a bigger academic study of the literature around ambidexterity that Nicholson has made (as the reader will find in the Acknowledgements section of the book). He explains that he chose the game of soccer to illustrate his ideas for two reasons. 'Firstly, the question of equal footed-ness seemed to be so obvious and yet studies showed how far even the best footballers were from such an achievement. In the second place the fact that the Soccer World Cup was held in SA was an incentive to publish my thoughts at such an auspicious moment in our history'. For this reader, Nicholson's well-researched book opened a door into the history of an established theory I had not even really been aware of. It is an unusual passion: and he does it justice by fictionalising the complex debates it stirs up. Nicholson is also aware of the patriarchal underpinnings of our South African society: exploring the exclusion of girls from mainstream school soccer, and writing to show he believes that they should be participating more in this sport. Thandi is involved with a woman for a while, before finding love with a white man – ironically the man responsible for the death of her father (although she does not know this). In so mapping her romantic trajectory Nicholson shows himself open to previously frowned upon sexualities.

What I liked most about this book is that it shows how well-integrated Chris Nicholson is with the intricate multi-cultural society that exists in KwaZulu-Natal, the site of his novel. He evinces a real understanding of Zulu, Indian, and European mindsets, and of the heaving and convoluted political landscape of post-apartheid SA. But, that being said, what worried me about 'One hand washes the other' is that it borders on rhetorical at times, as if the characters and various scenarios have been thought up rationally as ciphers, to conjure up Nicholson's rational thinking: rather than flowing from some emotionally spontaneous creative font.