

Try this for local book of year

THE SEA OF WISE INSECTS

Terry Westby-Nunn
Jacana

REVIEW: Aly Verbaan

ONCE in a bluish moon a reader is treated to a run of good books, which naturally sets the bar for the next one higher and higher, eventually rendering it virtually impossible to sustain, much like a sky-diver reaching terminal velocity. I scored a hat trick this week with local writers, but Terry Westby-Nunn is the blinder of the bunch.

Formulae may sell books, but imagination makes literature. The latter is an art, but the former is a safer bet for publishers, particularly before the holidays, when many readers may be inclined towards beach entertainment rather than mind expansion. *The Sea of Wise Insects* is a solution for the indecisive: here is a potent and enviable conte that feels instinctual rather than constructed.

The Sea of Wise Insects uses a fascinating, if macabre, sub-structure: Alice Wolfe's body is a quilt of bad luck. She wears her scars – a script of her life – like tattoos. "They say I am accident-prone. Ill-fated Alice who draws a dark little world of scars around her. My skin, a parchment of tales... I have always been unlucky."

A would-be suitor suggests she has a persecution complex, but, as Alice points out, it does seem that she is indeed being persecuted – by life, by fate.

Alice is not ashamed of the evidence of her quirky and accident-prone nature – in fact, she is well aware there are those who are drawn to her precisely because of her apparently calamitous karma – but she chooses carefully with whom she shares her idiosyncrasies. Enter Ralph.

Alice, who is from Cape Town, is working in a decidedly freaky establishment in London – euphemistically called the Hotel Tisca. The Tisca is in fact a cul-de-sac of life, where those in mental disarray wander aimlessly and largely unrehabilitated, supposedly recovering from an array of illnesses – drug addiction at best, self-nominated amputeeism at its March Hare worst.

When Ralph meets Alice, he asks her whether she is for real. "No. This is the Tisca. Nothing here is real. It's all part of the collective subconscious," comes the reply. Very Hotel California.

However, Ralph appears to be sane, "too normal", as Alice puts it. As with so many ill-fated relationships, there is a portent that Alice doesn't recognise for what it is.

Falling for Ralph alarmingly quickly, Alice tells us: "My only defence was to rag him about his GQ look, telling him he was a sick voyeur who enjoyed the Tisca spectacle.

"He chuckled at that, entertained by what he called my 'endearing doubts' and reassured me that his ordinary façade masked a strange and irreverent writer, who plucked characters from the Tisca for an off-kilter novel he was writing, 'something surreal and yet... disturbingly real'."

The Sea of Wise Insects is cleverly four-squared: where many a writer would have been satisfied with the progression of this narrative as a solo, Westby-Nunn interweaves subplots of Alice's complicated family tapestry; a gripping current situation in which her sister-in-law-to-be is killed in a car accident that Alice takes the blame for (not that she was fond of Veronica by any stretch of the imagination); her life in Cape Town with the Baron von Münchhausen-esque Ralph, and the mounting horror of

Wickedly dark humour relieves the intensity of the narrative

the realisation of what Ralph has done; plus the goings-on at the Tisca, where, for the only time in her life, Alice felt she fitted in.

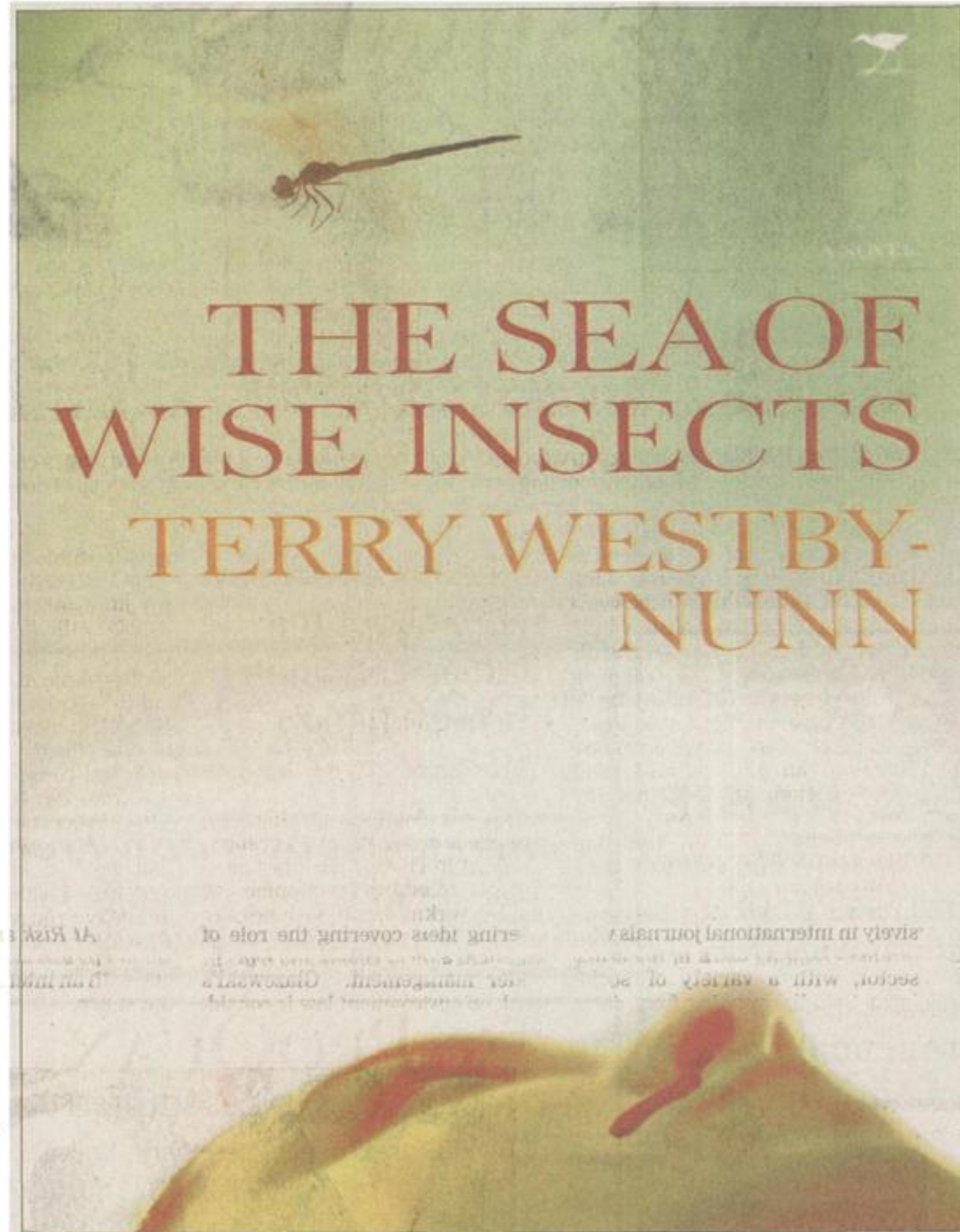
You are likely wondering what insects have to do with all this. Here comes the overlay that makes this more than the usual "ripping good yarn".

Westby-Nunn comes out of left field with her use of factual information bytes to head up each chapter, extracted from existent biological works, for example: "Full investigations have been made into the extraordinary way some insects can remain alive and even active when such apparently vital parts of the body as the head have been removed." *From Man and Insects* by L. Hugh Newman", and "I like writing about the firefly, too, for the very reason that this little insect is still wrapped in intriguing mystery. What is the motive of the light? What is the light? I can tell you very well what it is not, but the opposite side of the balance sheet will remain blank". *From The Soul of the White Ant* by Eugène Marais."

Or beautiful aphorisms, such as Emile Cioran's "What would be left of our tragedies if an insect were to present us his?"

And this from Salvador Dali: "When I was five years old I saw an insect that had been eaten by ants and of which nothing remained except the shell. Through the holes in its anatomy one could see the sky." Impeccable choices all.

A vicarious murder escalates the intrigue, while



wickedly dark humour relieves the intensity, putting one in mind of the arthouse film, *Delicatessen*.

Westby-Nunn's imagery is startlingly original, by turns grotesque and enchanting, and the bodily and emotionally

scarred Alice's dates with destiny and disaster border on the existential.

Naturally, there is a twister of a twist that leaves one hanging, which is oddly satisfying, in the way that books are when readers are left to draw their

own conclusions.

The Sea of Wise Insects is an inimitable debut and undoubtedly my pick for the local book of the year. One certainly looks forward to a second, and soon. ● Verbaan is an award-winning journalist and a fiction editor.