

A touch of class

RELAX – this is not another white-guilt wallow. Wessel Ebersohn offers something far more muscular. The cover notes give away the outcome of a doomed, racially complicated, apartheid era Romeo and Juliet affair, but the plot cunningly retains the urgency of a thriller.

The author's unpretentious style is perfectly suited to the time and place. A modest telling of innocent love, threatened by a mad social system, is hugely affecting. There is

no attempt to cheapen the exposition with emotional flourishes. Two teenagers from different social communities, a white boy and a girl of colour, simply fall in love and are too young and too delighted with each other to understand the possible consequences under the laws of the time. Or even to comprehend the evil of the system.

They are not idiots. But, in a land that had not yet suffered the shock of television, they lived in comparative ignorance. Both families see themselves as deeply respectable, leading lives of petit bourgeois propriety. Separately.

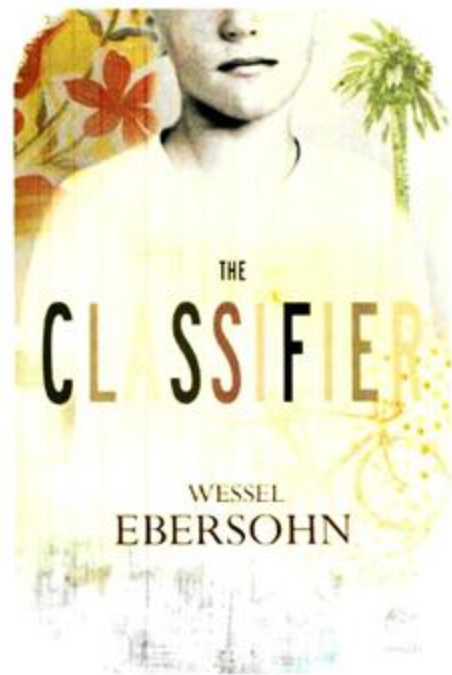
The irony is that boy's forbidding (but nevertheless admired) father is a high priest at the Durban temple of racism – the Department of Internal Affairs. He is the eponymous *Classifier* of the novel's title, and believes, with chilling faith, in the absolute responsibility of his role in preserving white dominance. It is a grave responsibility, borne with inflexible dignity.

His children do not know that he plays God in deciding the racial classifications which mean life or death to those who come before him for official physical scrutiny. Ebersohn's perfect recall of peaceful period suburban life, banalities and all, demonstrates how easily corrupt authorities can conceal monstrosities. Ordinary people are distracted by ordinary responsibilities. Why waste time brooding on rumours of nightmares?

Even *The Classifier's* own children were unaware of his professional activities. As, it is said, tends to be the case with hangmen's families.

Dr Albert Hertzog, waspish former Minister of Posts and Telegraphs,

Len Ashton
reviews
The Classifier
(Umuzi/Struik)
by **Wessel Ebersohn**



fulminated on the dangers of television and managed to delay the arrival of *The Little Black Box* in South Africa for years. He was perfectly correct in assuming that TV would undermine the apartheid system by projecting a racially mixed Western world.

Well, Pandora's box is now gaping wide, but better the devil we know. Despite *Idols* and general inanity.

The Classifier includes some vivid period pieces, such as family visits to a hearty Eastern Cape Afrikaans farming grandpa, rejoicing in his land. And we pity his bewilderment when his paradise collapses.

Papa Classifier, eager to impress his son with the cruel "necessity" of bureaucratic racism in action, requires his son to attend a series of harrowing appeal hearings. The distress of the appellants in the impassive face of the law destroys the boy's illusions forever. His patriarch turns out to be the devil, the enemy of love.

The author's subtle, gentle approach to the appalling *denouement* is all the more effective for its lack of histrionics. Ebersohn is an accomplished and individual story-teller. ■