

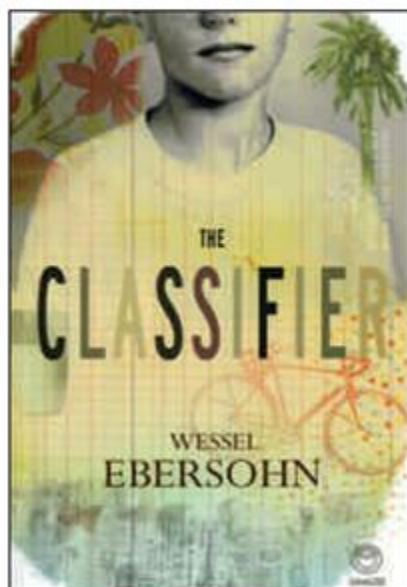
BOOK OF THE WEEK: A coming-of-age novel

Achingly poignant

BOOK REVIEW
The Classifier
Wessel Ebersohn
Umuzi

WRITTEN in a somewhat leisurely, restrained style, and lovingly devoted to considerable detail, this is a deceptive novel: at its heart lie intensely painful experiences. In terms of genre, it is roughly a coming-of-age novel, following the growth of an Afrikaans boy, Chrissie Vorster, from childhood to adolescence in Durban, with occasional leaps forward into middle-age in another country. In these latter years, we see the long-term consequences of the environment, the passions and the decisions of the earlier years.

The novel (which sounds intensely autobiographical but is not, as far as I can ascertain, directly so) provides a penetrating insight into the life of what is doubtless a fairly ordinary Afrikaans suburban family in the early seventies. It also illuminates, sometimes chillingly, the mind-set



among otherwise decent people that led to and supported apartheid. The Classifier of the title is Chrissie's father Bernardus, whose "very important" work is to sort out coloured people "trying for white" from people who are "really" white. In his quiet way, Bernardus is carrying out a proc-

ess not unlike that which happened in Nazi Germany in the thirties and forties, though for Chrissie his father is an intensely admirable, if over-distant, man with whom the boy longs to bond. Events in the story lead to Chrissie's ultimate total disillusionment. And all of these events are seen, in what is probably the book's most disarming and touching feature, through the eyes of someone who is still just a child — innocent, eager, bewildered, ever-hopeful.

The event which totally upsets the apple-cart is Chrissie's falling hopelessly in love with a coloured girl, Ruthie, from a nearby suburb. Ebersohn's depiction of escalating young love is beautifully handled as it swells into an unstoppable, dangerous and illegal passion. Of course, it eventually sets Chrissie bitterly against his beloved family. Ebersohn's dignified prose is laced with streaks of pure pain, the personal human story never swamped by politics or preachiness. And the final phase of this utterly South African story is both peaceful and achingly poignant.

David Pike