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Christopher Hope

The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky

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The South African emigré novelist Christopher Hope has become known for cosmopolitan narratives about displaced characters who are weighed down by the baggage of the past. His new book, however, returns to the time before we acquired pasts. This loosely connected sequence of stories, most of which have been broadcast on BBC radio, describes a childhood on a small Transvaal housing estate in the early 1950s. It is a world in which fathers back from the desert war "up north" do battle with the dry earth of their gardens, and where nothing ever happens apart from the visits of the Indian topsoil man or the water truck which sprays the streets to keep the dust down.

The stories are written in an uncluttered style which is as clean as the dry air of the Transvaal highveld and is perfectly tuned to the numinous experience of youth. The narrator, Martin, describes how the spray of the water truck "curved and dipped . . . , turning dust into mirrors where the water hit, sending everything swimming, wet and free". Martin's friend Sally, the best leg-break bowler on the estate, has the "habit of feeding the toes of one foot into the other". Martin is fascinated by Sally, especially by the shape of her legs, which inexplicably make him feel hungry, and by the way that "everything about her fitted together".

Martin and Sally are intrigued by Mr Swirsky, the pharmacist. Mr Swirsky is from England and has seen the world. He has a shiny black mustache, smells of liquorice, and wears a white coat that crackles with starch. He builds castles in his shop out of green cough-drop boxes and dark blue magnesia bottles. Martin's parents are not always at ease with Mr

Swirsky, but they agree he is a good man in a crisis. The children don't like the way he laughs, "but we liked him so much in every other way that we pretended he wasn't doing it".

These children take most things as they come, but some of the happenings on the estate strike even them as odd. They understand that servants always wear uniforms of calico shorts edged in red piping, and that people who aren't white don't live in proper houses. But they wonder why the men have to chase away Nicodemus, the borrowed servant who has been such a consolation to the widowed Mrs van Reen. And it does seem surprising that Mrs Strydom should move into the servant's quarters just because her husband is pleasant to Precious, their disabled gardener.

In truth, of course, the genteel society of Martin's parents is held together by a cover of low-level madness, and the children's occasional puzzles are nothing but thin rays of sanity poking through. Too much sanity can be dangerous. When Mr Smirsky brings back a new wife from England, she gives money to the servants at Easter, and doesn't see why she shouldn't walk arm in arm down the street with her black assistant. These minor acts have major repercussions for the Swirskys, and the pieces cannot be put together again.

In stories told from a child's point of view, what the child does not understand must be left implicit. But in this case implicit does not mean unspoken. Martin's parents and their friends speak almost entirely in euphemisms, and Martin has every reason to dwell on the curious words they utter. According to his father, Nicodemus has given Mrs van Reen "a bun in the oven", and his mother refers to this entity as the widow's "little dilemma". Gus Trupshaw, his father's friend, thinks that the topsoil man is "a bit dainty, if you follow me", and elaborates unhelpfully, "I'm talking of bunnies". "A bit of slap and tickle", Martin is told, when he wonders what anybody would be "after the Waafs" for.

The Love Songs of Nathan J. Swirsky deserve to become known as a minor classic. Hope's stories perfectly capture their time as much as their place. The South African setting adds a

specific dimension, but the world of Hope's children will be familiar to anybody who grew up in the 1950s, in the time before television, when there was nothing to do all day, and you had to decipher adult life for yourself.