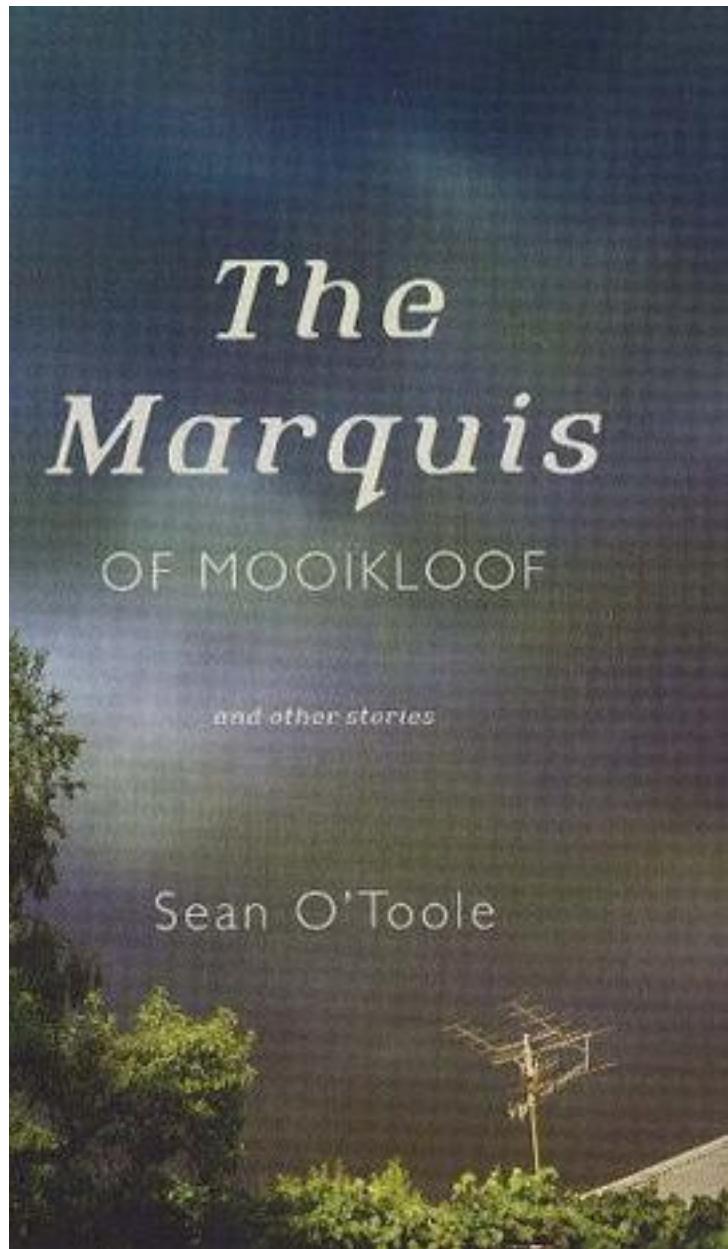


The Marquis of Mooikloof and Other Stories



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The Marquis of Mooikloof is a marvellously fresh collection of short stories that rings true with consistency and subtlety. Describing the experiences of mixed New South Africa, they flit across moments or episodes of suburban angst and ennui - but in a manner completely without histrionics or wasted sentiment. The stories are mostly short - some appear as mere fragments, others more as narratives. In the title story a deposed Robert Mugabe and his wife move to Mooikloof and their recently divorced businessman neighbour plans an elaborate, but, as it turns out, ill-conceived meat braai to welcome them to the neighbourhood. In 'The Magic of Numbers' an elderly widow endlessly travels around townships and settlements, protected by her gardener, buying lotto tickets in the belief that the SA lotto is rigged to favour black people. The effectiveness of this collection lies in its attention to detail; its observation of the intimacies, the particularities, the painful truths, and the unsaid, of local life and existence. O'Toole writes with the journalist's canny and detached tone, coupled with a great degree of pathos and occasionally grim humor of the ironic kind. The landscapes, buildings, restaurants and suburbs of his stories are bleak and complicated places, peopled by characters who cannot connect or communicate with others. One of the pleasurable parts of reading this collection is the recognisable quality of much of the detail: the lotto queues; the Shell Ultra Cities; the guarded suburban enclaves; Gautengers holidaying in KZN; Radio 702; tow-truck operators. The impression of each story is one of descriptiveness yet O'Toole's style is lean and clear - unfettered and often 'undescriptive'; relying largely on dialogue and the internal musings and observations of its characters to paint scenes. Astute and tight, O'Toole's character and space-driven 'anecdotes' portray a world of failures; of travellers; of apartness; of silences and distances. That said, O'Toole's stories do have results: although little often appears to happen, and what does is so often incidental, one barely notices the significant things that quietly result from the bumping together of his characters and their situations. And while O'Toole avoids using an overtly political voice, the stories themselves and the characters in them often leave behind a sense of the rightness and wrongness of things, on a much more personal and effective level.

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