

# classifying the classifier

*Capturing the destructive effects of apartheid policies on the families they divided*

**The Classifier**  
by Wessel Ebersohn  
Umuzi, 2011  
Review: Annel Pieterse

**W**ESSEL Ebersohn, best known for his crime thrillers, presents a detailed and evocative exploration of apartheid policy and the practice of race classification in his latest novel, *The Classifier*.

The novel is absorbing, specifically because of its relation to factuality, although the reader is informed that "(t)his story is a work of fiction". The author's dedication (to his wife), however, reads as follows: "For more than thirty years you have been asking me when I was going to write it. During all that time everything that has eventually led to this writing was too close, too overwhelming."

This incidental contextual information suggests writing of a very personal kind and consequently the reader's sense of genre is primed to accommodate seams of memoir in the fabric of Ebersohn's fiction.

On his website, Ebersohn notes that "the seeds (for this book)" were first sown 35 years ago, when "a person very close" to him was employed by the Department of the Interior in Durban's shipping office. She became aware of what the race classification office down the passage was doing, the nature of its work, and wanted to resign, but Ebersohn asked her to stay on until they had "gathered material about the activities of the race classification section and the thinking behind those activities".

However, in early 1980, on sitting down to write a novel from the "background material at (his) disposal", he found he had no story, and the result of his writing was "a

failure", more "a political tract than a novel".

In 2009, he was finally ready and had found a story for this material.

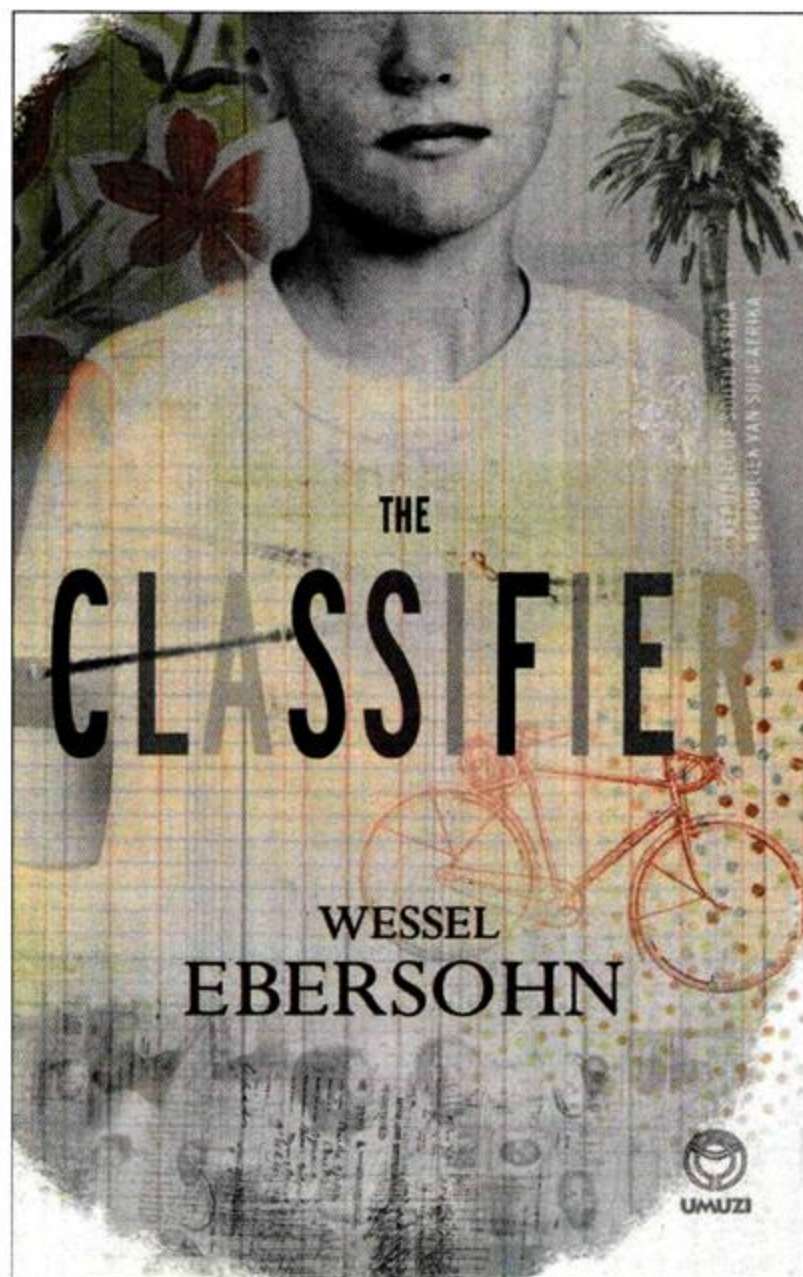
The result was "an entirely new book", a "human story" conveying the effects of apartheid's obsession with classification.

A Bildungsroman of sorts, the novel traces the development of Chris Vorster, a young Afrikaner boy growing up in Durban during the 1970s. From the point of view of a middle-aged Chris, now living in Maine, US, and having changed his name to the more English "Foster", the narrative recounts Chris's relationship with his conservative Nationalist family on the one hand, and his growing relationship with Ruthie Peterson and her family, who live in the "coloured" part of town, on the other.

Chris's father heads the Office of Race Classification (which is later changed to the more euphemistic "Population Registration"), in a country where an official law, the Immorality Act, guarantees severe punishment for those who dare to enter into cross-racial relationships. It is therefore just a matter of time before the feelings developing between Chris and Ruthie lead to traumatic repercussions for both families.

Through the vignettes of Chris's childhood, which introduce the reader to his family and a 1970s white South African lifestyle, Ebersohn manages to convey some of the ambiguities of growing up Afrikaans under an Afrikaner Nationalist government.

In one incident, Chris's father emphatically intervenes to stop a group of white men assaulting an old Zulu man on the beach, but then proceeds cold-heartedly to separate bi-racial babies from their white mothers. Staunch Afrikaners, Chris's family and their immediate community are all "filled with indignation that the black children had rebelled against having to speak Afrikaans at school", yet the Vorsters themselves send Chris and



his two sisters to an English-language school, because the students there have better social manners than at the Afrikaans school.

These evocations of Afrikaner families, especially the ambiguities and contradictions, rang true for me. Because I identified strongly with some of these representations, I found it a bit frustrating at times that the "idiomatic" Afrikaans, rendered in English, seemed rather stilted. For example, early in the novel, we are told of a distant relative, "Uncle Piet Brother-in-law".

The habit of distinguishing a brother-in-law by adding the word "swaer" to his name is quite common in Afrikaans families. Thus, "Oom Piet-swaer" signifies "Oom Piet" the brother-in-law. To render this quirky, idiomatic use into the clumsy "Uncle Piet Brother-in-law" had the effect of alienating me from what would have been a moment of recognition.

Furthermore, to render it in English at all seems unnecessary and results in an uneven rhythm, since later in the novel Chris's mother comforts his grandmother: "Mama wrapped her arms around Ouma. 'Toe maar, toe maar,' she said in that soothing way she had" Here we have the Afrikaans "Ouma" – surely no different from "swaer", since both signify kinship relations; we also have the complete Afrikaans words "toe maar", which, with words like "ouderling" and "dominee" elsewhere in the novel are not translated anywhere for the same readers who would presumably not understand "Oom Piet-swaer".

Despite these slight inconsistencies and a few minor editorial oversights, the novel is gripping.

As the young Chris learns about love across the colour line, he also learns exactly how that colour line is determined. Working in the holidays in his father's office, he

quickly begins to "anticipate (his) father's judgment for each case". The incredibly detailed descriptions of the processes and policies of racial classification, particularly in the scenes dealing with the influx of Portuguese refugees after the Mozambican revolution of 1974, are revealing of the mechanisms of apartheid ideology and state policy.

As these refugees begin to stream through the doors of the office that will determine whether they get to stay in South Africa or be deported to Brazil, Chris learns to distinguish with almost total accuracy between a skin burnt by a few days fleeing across the veld and one that was naturally brown.

If there was any trace of African features – a broad, blunt nose, flaring nostrils, excessively frizzy hair or cheekbones that were too broad – his (father's) decision went against them.

Chris's father is obviously the "classifier" of the title. However, in anticipating his father's decisions, Chris inadvertently and ironically also learns how to classify. In fact, he is so good at it, that by the end of the first Thursday working for his father, he "had only made one mistake".

Furthermore, he says: "I told myself I had almost learnt to do the work of my father... I too would soon be able to do important work like my father."

Thus the invidious nature of racial profiling is culturally transmitted from father to son in the same way the father teaches the son hunting skills – as part of a passage into manhood. This comment by Chris suggests he is to follow the ways of his father: he is in training to take his father's place, at a symbolic level, as a member of the new generation of Afrikaner men.

It is against his father and his father's culture that Chris must inevitably assert himself and the extreme repercussions of his actions have terrible consequences for all involved, eventually leading to his name change and self-imposed exile.

Ebersohn captures something of the shatteringly destructive effects of apartheid policies on the families they divided.

The novel offers a vivid way of imagining and understanding the long-term effects of policies such as race classification, and the manner in which their repercussions still reverberate through our private lives and the organisation of public space in "post-apartheid" South Africa.