

CITATION

2015 PERCY FITZPATRICK PRIZE FOR YOUTH LITERATURE

The entries for the 2015 award covered a wide range of social topics: gender issues, sexual abuse, animal abuse and poaching, bullying and a number of issues which are relevant to the youth in South Africa today. Other topics included the illegal diamond trade and diamond smuggling in Africa. The panel was particularly impressed with the manner in which these very sensitive issues were addressed and made real on a level which is accessible to a young reader.

The panel (comprising Candice Livingston, Johan Anker and Philip Thraves) reached a unanimous conclusion that the Percy Fitzpatrick Prize for books published in South Africa (for children between the ages of 10 and 16) in 2014 and 2015 should be awarded to *The Mark* by Edyth Bulbring (Tafelberg, 2014).

The Mark fits into the genre of dystopian novels, a category which is very popular in youth literature at the moment, with the likes of *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *The Divergent Series* by Veronica Roth. But unlike the works listed above, *The Mark* is gritty and has a distinct 1984 Orwellian feel to it, with observable Dickensian echoes. This novel is complex in the manner in which it deals with the 'apartheid-esque' nature of this society that has been divided along caste lines and social strata, with the main theme throughout the story being that of dissatisfaction with your pre-ordained lot in life and the struggle to escape from it.

This book is set in Slum City in the year 264 PC. The world has been laid to waste by the Conflagration (which is never quite fully explained) and it is in this harsh sphere, where the relentless sun beats down, that people's lives are run by a merciless elite and law is enforced by a inhuman taskforce. A mark at the base of the spine controls each person's destiny and 'The Machine' decides what work they will do and who their life partner will be. In this world, everyone must make their contribution.

Juliet Seven, also known as "Ettie", stands on the brink of turning 15, where her life as a drudge will begin and her fate-mate mate will be chosen. Like everyone else, her future is marked by the numbers on her spine, a mark that she continually tries to remove,

unsuccessfully. But Ettie decides to challenge her fate and in so doing, fulfils the prophecy that was spoken of before she even existed. Ettie, the first person narrator, presents a subjective view of the world in which she finds herself, but is able to articulate the challenges experienced by all the characters from each social caste. She is wise beyond her years and can come across as mean at times, yet we, the readers, are privy to her struggles and attempts to protect those around her, especially her friend, Kitty and her love interest Nicolas. Her perceived 'meanness' is easily recognisable as a protection mechanism, one which she had to learn as a very young child and which safeguards her against the perils of the society in which she lives.

Bulbring is able to capture the harshness of the world in which the characters find themselves and through the genius of her storytelling, is able to draw the reader into this post-apocalyptic world, where torture, control and regulations are the order of the day. The spirit in which Ettie is able to rise up against this oppression, is captured in Bulbring's ability to describe the character and her interactions in great detail. The introduction of characters like 'The Reader' also allow the main character to grow, as there is a soft place for her to find solace in this barren and arid emotional wasteland. The convincing manner, in which a futuristic space is described in this novel, is extremely effective and together with the sustained tension in the plot, makes for a riveting read.

The title of the book encompasses the complexity of the subject matter presented in this novel, not only indicating the actual number or mark imprinted on Ettie's back, but alluding to the criminal elements and confidence tricksters that Ettie encounters and is part of herself. Ettie is identified as the 'saviour' or messianic figure in *The Mark* and as such, will always be the marked one. At the heart of this novel is a challenge to recognise the struggle of the disempowered and disenfranchised. It serves as a warning (as do most dystopian novels) of the ramifications of trying to codify people according to birth and marriage and to segregate society. This book could easily be prescribed as a set work as it could be used in a comparative study in order to inform learners of what happened during the Apartheid era in South Africa while drawing parallels with today's society at large.