

Coming-of-age tale is also an ode to all things Italian

● Socio-political commentary and historical anecdote in SA combine in Hilary Prendini Toffoli's debut novel

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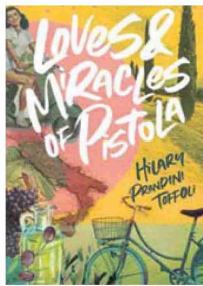
Cultural juxtapositions often make for an intriguing plotline and rich textures.

The prologue to the charming debut novel *Loves & Miracles of Pistola* (Penguin Random House) by Hilary Prendini Toffoli, doyenne of SA magazine writers, sets the scene: "In the ragingly racist SA of the 1950s it was unthinkable for the train stewards who served early morning coffee to the white female passengers in the sleeping cars to be black." But whites scorned waiting. Prejudice and racism necessitated a plan, so the government sought to resolve the dilemma by recruiting stewards from the nation with the best waiters in the world: Italy.

Though few in number, they added to the Italian prisoners of war held at the Zonderwater prisoner of war camp who chose to remain in SA, together forming the country's first wave of Italian immigrants. Their influence has been disproportionately resounding: today, every city and almost every town will have a pizzeria or a Catholic church and streets where Vespas are parked and the aromas of simmering tomato sauce, strong coffee and stronger garlic permeate the neighbourhood.

Like the area around the Super Sconto deli and grocery store in Johannesburg's Louis Botha Avenue or Sea Point's La Perla restaurant, legendary and long-lasting gems established by first-generation immigrants whose progeny form SA's 75,000-strong Italian community.

The book's narrative centres on late-adolescent Ettore ("Pistola") Casagrande, coming of age in post-World War 2 Italy, a nation drained and devastated by the conflict and its political



aftermath, especially in rural areas where opportunities are scarce and horizons limited. Raised by his grandfather, Nonno Mario, he's poor but happy – relatively.

Like all hot-blooded ragazzi, he has women on his mind, and also broader hopes and dreams. He wants la dolce vita to be more than his village can offer.

Fate causes his love to be spurned, but fortune deals him an opportunity to become a waiter on trains of the SA Railways. So he embarks not just on a journey to a new land but a voyage of self-discovery.

Pistola's adventures envelop settings enriched through props from both countries: old Fiat models and Lambretta scooters; Jungle Oats and Black Cat. Some are era-specific and invoke dark days, such as Italy's Cinecittà cinema production hub in Rome, launched in 1937 with the propagandist proclamation by Mussolini that "Cinema is the most powerful weapon". Others are enduringly tragic, such as sweeps into the melting pots of District Six and Sophiatown, since destroyed in the machinations of damnable, systematic racism which Pistola vaguely understands but are poignant in their dramatic irony.

The novel is timely, too, in its ambient theme that political and socioeconomic history is always on the march, and is repeating



Street of dreams:

Hilary Prendini Toffoli says of Cape Town's Long Street: 'Its shops and boarding houses are as intriguingly diverse and intermittently falling apart as the people who frequent them.' /Getty Images/Universal Images/Education Images

itself today in Italy's Covid-triggered recession and its populist right-wing swing.

Prendini Toffoli is sanguine: "Politically it has always been divided. Controversy is in Italian genes. After the war the country was half Communist, and look at it now."

SA's roiling history, while obliquely addressed, is convincingly embedded into the plot. "We're a nation that has been the victim of too many pranks played by history," reflects the sage character of Oupa Fanie, whom Pistola befriends fleetingly.

The tone is light and alluring, with colourful turns of phrase – Italian, a scattering of Afrikaans, even smatterings of Yiddish – and vibrancy in the portrayal of disparate cultures in developing, emerging 1950s SA, such as the description of Cape Town's

Long Street: "Its shops and boarding houses are as intriguingly diverse and intermittently falling apart as the people who frequent them."

But it is peppered with pathos, resulting in a style that reminds one of Louis de Bernières (*Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *Birds Without Wings*); not quite as poetic, perhaps, but wistful, attuned to tiny details yielding understanding of complex situations, and scattered with universal themes and classical references.

Greek philosopher Heraclitus insisted that the world was in constant flux. When Pistola embraces this and grasps the opportunity implicit in accepting that nothing ever stays the same, he is able to break free from the village and the venerable but narrow-

minded familial roots that constrain him.

This is his little miracle. But food is Pistola's more earthly, everyday desire. Pistola feels overworked on the trains; but worse is the homesickness, not insubstantially linked to a yearning for proper Italian food, such as panettone and prosciutto on Christmas, "which makes his mouth water and his heart ache". Prendini Toffoli is perhaps best known as a style and food writer, and food runs as a motif throughout, her passion transported onto almost every page so that the whole reads such as a sweet and luscious tiramisù or a comforting bowl of minestrone.

Still, it's love that propels Pistola. His quest for true amore is convoluted. Prendini Toffoli's language is tender but sagacious: the process requires

"probing the tender spots, making him put his life, his whole existence, under scrutiny, forcing him to examine the parts that hurt, and to deal with them". Happily, he manages, ultimately, to find a love which bridges his heritage and his new life.

Like a soap opera with dulcet tones, and meaningful themes rather than meaningless meanderings, *Loves & Miracles of Pistola* succeeds as a tale of coming-of-age, sociopolitical commentary, historical anecdote and an ode to Italian cuisine. It will make readers admire individual energy and passion, contemplate an aspect of SA's pluralism and acknowledge past problems and current challenges.

And – not yet being able to dine out at one's local ristorante – readers will want to cook something Italian very soon.