

The background of the book cover is a vibrant red, overlaid with large, bold, black abstract shapes that resemble stylized leaves or petals. These shapes are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement. The text is printed in a clean, white, sans-serif font, centered horizontally across the cover.

HARRY BLOOM

TRANSVAAL

EPISODE

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS



Briefly,

ABOUT THE BOOK

This is the story of the African Transvaal. Nelstrom is typical for this section of the world: clean and tidy, ringed by mountains, and housing those who are white. Typical as well, but tucked away on its outskirts, is a shabby down-at-the-heel shanty-town known as the Location. Here the black people live. Everything they do and all of their existence is subject to the rules laid down for them by a government-selected white superintendent . . . Once day an incident occurs, a relatively unimportant one, as such things go. It touches off the smouldering hate of a people oppressed and of their oppressors. Incident follows incident with an almost unbearable tension until this episode in the life of a people burns itself out. Yet, before it is ended, the reader – emotionally and spiritually – has become a partaker in the day-to-day history of an African town.

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

A Collection of Works by Writers in the English Language



HARRY BLOOM · *Transvaal* EPISODE

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TRANSVAAL

EPISODE

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*To Beryl, Bram, Guy and Trevor,
who in various ways helped
me to write this book*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Nelstroom has no existence outside this book; it is a fictional town. It is necessary to state this in case some readers, from the description of streets, landmarks, locale or climate will believe that they recognise Nelstroom as being a town they know. But Nelstroom has no real-life existence; it is meant to be merely a depiction of a typical, middle-sized Transvaal town. It is indeed, like so many such towns, that there is perhaps a temptation to try and identify it with one of them. Hence the need for this explanation.

The people of Nelstroom, both in the white town and the location, are similarly, imaginary people. That such *Types* exist, indeed are prevalent in South Africa, is of course true—otherwise I should not have written the story. But the people in this book are not modelled on real people, and if it should happen that a description of a character seems to fit a real person, that would be a purely accidental and unintentional consequence of writing a work of fiction that is intended to picture and typify a segment of life in South Africa. No particular living persons were in my mind when I wrote this book.

There have been many race riots in South Africa—they form part of the scene, like floods or droughts. Some of them occurred after I finished writing the book, and one of these bears a striking similarity to the events of this story. But these events were not modelled on any particular riot. Every riot has its own features. I have merely tried to describe the kind of things that *do* happen when, in the peculiar setting of South Africa, racial tensions reach breaking point.

1953 was a quiet year. The previous year had been one of upheaval and violence, but in 1953 everything quietened down, as if exhaustion had forced a rest upon the contenders. Nobody had won and nothing was decided, but an hour of uneasy quiet settled on the land. And then the flames leapt up, briefly, in a town called Nelstroom.

CHAPTER ONE

THERE IS an air of activity about Nelstroom, especially in the mornings. White-bearded old farmers arrive early from the districts for a day's shopping. A man takes delivery of a brand-new tractor and drives the gigantic bright-coloured toy away up the street. Lorries from the canneries rumble through the town carrying massive loads of canned tomato juice. Cars and trucks with a variety of licence plates fill up at the petrol stations before making the long trip down to the bushveld. A bell rings on the market square where a cattle sale is in progress. Hit tunes from café juke boxes blare out into the street. A clangour arises from the railway repair sheds and hangs in the air, a background for all the other noises.

A national road drives eastwards out of Johannesburg, over the flat plateau of the highveld, down the escarpment into the lowveld, and on to the coastal towns. Nelstroom lies about half-way along, within sight of the mountain kingdom of Swaziland. From the streets of Nelstroom one catches glimpses of the silvery road sneaking down the mountainside, cautiously stalking the town from the cover of a pine plantation, before coming out on to the floor of the valley. It makes a last dash across the little apron of flat land, enters the town by a back street and joins finally with Potgieter Street, Nelstroom's main thoroughfare.

All up and down Potgieter Street are filling stations and cafés. There is a haze of colour from cigarette, beer and petrol advertisements, and a bright shine of chromium about the shops. There are new hotels, banks,

building societies, and a cinema with the flags of some recent jubilee still flying. Nelstroom, like many Transvaal towns, is old and new, old-fashioned and modern, a market town, a mining town and an industrial town, all at once.

There are some rich people in Nelstroom now, though still not many, and their houses look fine standing in the new wooded suburb overlooking the town. Most of its white people, however, live inside the town, in neat brick cottages with peach trees and rose bushes in the gardens. The whole town has a clean and tidy look, and with the mountains behind and the green valley rolling out below, it is pretty and sheltered and peaceful.

This is Nelstroom as the passing traveller sees it. This is the town that the visitor likes to remember. But there is another town, a submerged half, an ominous counterpart that lives within its shadow. The people of Nelstroom seldom speak about this other town. They would prefer not to think about it. But it is always present, somewhere, in their thoughts. Like captor and captive chained together, the two towns are never free from one another.

The curious thing is that one has to adjust one's eyes to see this second town. The people of both towns walk in the streets, but somehow one pays attention only to the white people. The black people seem to have a way of effacing themselves. When they meet a white man on the pavement, they slide out of his way, out of sight. They go about their business, very earnest, and apparently very anxious not to involve themselves with the white town more than necessary. They are always hurrying – or waiting. They wait in the shops until all the white people are served: they wait at their special window at the railway booking office until the clerk decides to notice them. They sit in silent, patient groups on the lawn of the Magistrate's Court, waiting for hours, days,

for news of a case. They are always there and they seem to be a part of the natural surroundings, like shrubs. Somehow their presence in the town is shadowy and unobtrusive. Mostly they are very poorly clothed, often in tatters.

The place where they live is something different from the poor quarter of a town, something different from the usual segregated district. It is a special kind of living arrangement that cannot be compared with anything outside this country. They call this place the location, which is itself a significantly unique use of the word, for it denotes not a place where people live, but one where something is to be found.

There are no signs showing the way to this place. One finds it by following the stream of a distinct kind of traffic that runs among the ordinary traffic of the town—ramshackle taxis, donkey carts, bicycles, women walking with bundles on their heads. It skirts the shopping section, goes past the high school, the park, through the factory section, alongside the fence of the railway yard, and across the railway line.

There, sloping away towards the river and stretching for more than a mile, lies an area crowded with poor houses. Nowhere does it touch the white area, for the two are kept apart by the railway line. And it is surrounded by a barbed-wire fence in which there are no gates except one at the southernmost end, which is the point farthest from the town.

A sand road runs parallel with the fence and straight down to the gate, and driving along the road, one sees the different styles of houses in the location. First, nearest the railway line, are wattle huts with peaked thatched roofs. They stand in clusters, like families, behind reed fences, and this part is like an old bush village, except that each house has a large, clear number above the door. They are the oldest houses, and were there even before the fence was erected.

Then comes an area of square cement houses with sheet-iron roofs held down by rocks. Each house is exactly like the next, and each has a number, like a badge, above the door. There had once been a housing scheme in Nelstroom but it was killed by mismanagement and a famous political feud in the Town Council, and the tenants completed the houses themselves. There are several acres of these tiny toy houses, laid out like white boxes in a factory yard.

Then the geometrical neatness suddenly ends and a desert of shanties commences. All the rest is a sprawling wasteland of mud-and-stone walls, unpainted wood, flattened paraffin tins, rusted corrugated iron, and flapping sackcloth. This makes up more than half the entire location. Here everything is dry and bleached, the exhausted sepia colour of hard, stamped-down earth. The surrounding veld is fresh and bright, there are blue mountains beyond, but here, inside the fence, is an area quarantined against the green things of nature. For an hour or two in the morning it is even shut out of the sunlight by a curious atmospheric effect. A pall of smoke from the night fires hangs, reluctant to rise, a few feet above the plateau of rooftops, holding to the exact shape of the location.

The inhabitants of the location live like a captured people. They are bound and tethered by laws that have no application to the inhabitants of the white town. There is a mass of prohibitions – and what is not prohibited has to be specially permitted. Wherever a man goes, whatever he does, he runs the risk of breaking a law. There is a multitude of papers – pink papers, green papers, buff papers – for everything must be written and authorised. Life in the location is stifled by the dense web of bureaucracy. A man in the location goes about with the superintendent's signature all over his person. He becomes a piece of paper, his family

becomes a cluster of papers, his house a number in a register, his job a yellow form; and his life and security exactly as valuable and durable as the scraps of paper that fill his pockets.

The work of the police is all too easy, for every man is a likely wrongdoer. No one can hope to obey all the laws – indeed it would be a catastrophe if everyone did, for many institutions, the farms particularly, are run on convict labour. The police stop any black man they see with a good chance of making an arrest. If things are too quiet in town, they raid the location and find the wrongdoers in their beds.

They call their Black Marias “pick-up vans”, a name which implies all too clearly that their function is to roam the streets like dogcatchers, on the lookout for the daily bag of chance offenders.

The location people live in desperately close contact with the police. Any knock on the door might be that of a policeman. Any day might be the one when a husband fails to come home from work and is found to be in gaol, arrested for an irregularity in his pass, for possessing a spiked stick, for sitting on the wrong bench in the park, for leaving his tax receipt at home, for disobedience, impertinence, trespass, nuisance, disturbance – for any one of countless possible crimes; the day when money must be hurriedly found for bails, fines, and lawyer’s fees; the day when a man is last seen before disappearing for weeks, months, sometimes years, while in his absence his house is sold and his family uprooted. Any night might be that when the police stage a raid on the location for beer or spirits, dangerous weapons, passes and permits, stolen goods – bursting into houses at random, ordering father, mother, and terrified children, lodgers and visitors at the point of a gun to stand in the street while they ransack the rooms.

Life in the location has a hovering uncertainty and unsafety, from hour to hour, day and night.

But it works out well for those sections of the white people who live by the labour of convicts. The farmers, who are the main support of the government, even co-operate with the police by building their own gaols, with their own money, and with the blessing of the Minister of Justice, to accommodate the constant flow of convicts from the location.

The location superintendent is a man with a peculiar job. He, more than any other official, is responsible for enforcing apartheid. Yet apartheid is not for him. All day long he works in an office surrounded by location people. His office in the location is a white frontier post in the black town.

Because of his daily contact with untouchables, people are inclined to consider his job a dirty one, and so it is not the kind of job to attract efficient or talented men. Even the government, despising the black people, tends to despise the official it employs to handle them — he is underpaid and overworked, promotion is slow.

Yet he is a man vested with extraordinary power. Everybody in the location lives by his goodwill. With a bang of his rubber stamp he can alter the course of a man's life. The medieval prince seldom had so much power over so many.

His job is a dirty one in another sense, too. He has to administer the hateful and obnoxious laws. And the location people hold him responsible for them, because he is the man they see in the office. He is the law and the government.

Yet his work brings him daily into the lives of the location people, and there is always a danger that he might become involved too closely. When this happens, his job is destroyed, for it cannot exist when the barrier that he is paid to maintain on behalf of the white town is down for him. So he must be constantly on guard. He must avoid being drawn into the affairs of the