

The Promise, by Damin Galgut

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Damon Galgut was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize last November for *The Promise*. His acclaimed novel centers on the Swart family, descendants of 17th century Dutch settlers, who own a farm outside Pretoria, South Africa.

The Promise begins in 1986, amid simmering racial tensions driven by apartheid. Rachel Swart, the family's matriarch, had succumbed after a long illness, and her relatives gathered for her funeral. Thirteen-year-old Amor, the youngest of the three Swart children, was sent home from boarding school to join her father Manie and her beautiful, self-centered older sister Astrid. Their eldest sibling Anton was given leave from his military service to return to the farm for his mother's burial.

During her lingering affliction, Rachel had been lovingly cared for by their Black maid Salome, "who has been on the farm forever. A stout solid woman, wearing a second-hand dress given to her by Ma years ago. Same age as Ma supposedly, forty, though she looks older. Not much shows on her face, she wears her life like a mask."

Rachel had converted from Judaism to the Dutch Reformed Church when she had married Manie. However, in her will she had stipulated a Jewish funeral which Manie begrudgingly allowed. Rigid and bigoted, Manie is influenced by Alwyn Simmers, pastor of a Pentecostal church, who promotes healing through divine intervention.

Two weeks before Rachel died, Amor overheard her parents discussing Rachel's request that Salome be given the "crooked little house" she's been living in on their farm. "Because I want her to have something," Rachel said. "After everything she's done. Promise me you'll do it." Manie then assured his ailing wife that he'll give Salome the meager three-room dwelling. However, after the funeral, when Amor reminds her father Manie of his vow, he completely denies he had ever made such a promise. Manie's stubborn refusal alienates his children and pits them against each other.

In the ensuing decades, Manie's broken promise affects the three Swart siblings in countless ways. Years later, when Amor returns from London, she's "taken by surprise at how much it mattered to her, this buried question from long ago. Whenever her mind strays to the farm, there are lots of stones to turn over, and Salome is one of them. But that particular stone never seems to find a resting place, no matter how often it's turned."

The Promise, indeed, is a disquieting tale. Damon Galgut audaciously skewers his characters' bigotry and religious hypocrisy. Riveting and memorable, *The Promise* is a worthy Booker Prize winner.

(Note: *The Promise* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 12.)