Secrets, glory, lies in local modern saga

***Kitchen Boy* by Jenny Hobbs (Random House/Struik, R150.00)**

THIS is the fifth novel by Jenny Hobbs, a talented and successful South African author.

The book has a number of conspicuous strengths and only one serious flaw. Foremost among the strengths is the skilful use of a funeral service to frame the narrative and the characterisation. Barely comprehensible readings from the King James Version of the Bible allow the congregation's attention to wander, the odd word or phrase suggesting a train of thought involving their particular memories of the deceased. Thus, bit by bit, the plot falls into place.

The central theme of heroism is excellently handled. What appears to be a simple fact of courageous action turns out to be an altogether more complex and ambiguous phenomenon. In his lifetime, John Kitching was universally acknowledged to be not only a war hero, but a rugby hero as well. Yet Kitching ("Kitchen Boy") carried with him to the grave the guilty secret of a failure of nerve that compromised his integrity.

His wife, who knows his secret, felt diminished by the attention her husband always enjoyed. Ironically, she too has a secret, which is only revealed after his death. Their son, who hates war, grows up denigrating his father's glory.

The novel is set against the backdrop of South Africa's democratisation, and the author succeeds admirably in conveying the hesitant and often gauche way in which whites seek to accommodate themselves to the new reality of black liberation.

My only criticism of *Kitchen Boy* is that what is intended to be the comic portrayal of the bishop, the black mayor and the undertaker fails to rise above mere caricature. – John Boje

Namibia – dry, the beloved country

Amid the bone-dry facts, this historical account finds sparks of light and magic

LINDA DE JAGER

***A History of Namibia* by Marion Wallace (Jacana, R199,95):**

IN THE last chapter of her book, author Marion Wallace throws down the gauntlet by inviting other historians to fill the gaps in her *A History of Namibia*. Quite a challenge, given the excellent job she has done.

Wallace manages to chronicle the complexities of Namibia's violent history, from its earliest times to the 19th century.

The book also sheds light on the country's darker chapters (like the Herero genocide of 1904-8); and there is certainly more than one grim chapter in the colonial history of Alte Südwest!

Then again, bone-dry and fact-riddled historical accounts like this, can never capture why many Namibian Germans still get tears in their eyes when they sing about this *heimat*, the harsh landscape somehow inspiring tenderness:

Hart wie Kameldornholz ist unser Land
Und trocken sind seine Riviere.
Die Klippen, sie sind von der Sonne verbrannt
Und scheu sind im Busch die Tiere.

(Hard like camelthorn wood is our land, and dry are its rivers. The rocks are burnt by the sun, and the animals hide in the bush)

It takes imagination to look beyond the facts and find the intricate nuances behind the sterile words of historical documentation.

However, sometimes Wallace loses her grip on the mere registering of history and allows powerful voices to speak down the passage of time in the first person.

The occasional spark of magic is to be found in such passages.

She quotes from the visionary letters of Hendrik Witbooi – the prominent indigenous leader in the south for two decades – as he records his disillusionment about Theodor Leutwein, the first architect of German power in Namibia in 1904: "I have for ten years stood in your law, under your law, and behind your law.

"For this reason I fear God the Father. All the souls which have for the last ten years perished from all

> I was too young to realise that I was witnessing something exceptional – a lost tradition

nations of Africa without guilt or cause, without the justification of warfare in times of peace, and under treaties of peace, accuse me."

Her book creates invaluable opportunity for individuals to map their own personal histories in the bigger context.

Given my particular origin – half German and half Afrikaans – I found specific historical features interesting that might leave others cold.

No doubt they will relate better to different elements of Namibian history, reflective of their ancestry.

It is the first time that anyone has clarified how big the group of "German men and other suspected rebels" that was rounded up and interned in South Africa and South West Africa during World War 2 were.

While Adolf Hitler's voice was finally stilled, the effects of his actions reverberated for German men in colonies all over the world even after the war had ended.

My German grandfather was "one of the 1 220 men" in Namibia who felt the effects. He would be reunited with my mother seven years later. She was one year old when he left and seven when he returned.

The political power struggles and resulting shifts in power make for ironic insights with the benefit of hindsight.

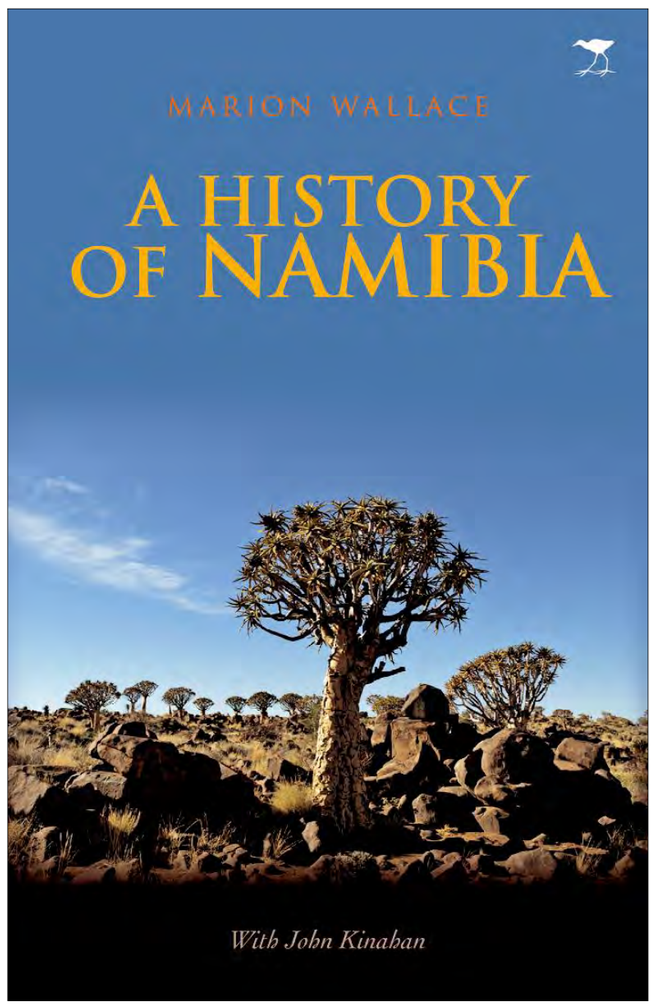
When South African rule kicked in, my mother probably had more in common with the children of Ovambo contract workers – for decades the source of cheap colonial labour – than she could ever imagine.

Wallace quotes one of these contract workers stating that when he (the father) returned from a two-year contract, "his child was already walking":

There are interesting factual tidbits for Namibians (and individuals interested in African history) throughout the book.

For example, one of the best known members of the Ovamboland People's Congress (one of the forerunners of Swapo) was Andimba Toiva Y Toivo – who apparently served in the South African army during World War II.

It's a comprehensive history and be warned that it takes time and concentration to wade through its 316 pages. It might not be easy holiday reading for your average tourist enjoying a Windhoek Lager and



spectacular views, yet, I would urge anyone to try and join the appreciative club of historians and finish the arduous journey "whatever it takes". You may find that Windhoek's cacophony of exotic street names guide you to some unexpected place down the passage of time – for example to Herero leaders like Samuel Maharero immortalised in Herero oral tradition and *omutandus* (praise songs).

Wallace makes mention of the famous 1925 Denver expedition to the Kalahari and the first filming and documentation of San history.

About 18 years ago I also observed a Bushman trance dance in the Khaudom, in the north-west of Namibia. I was too young to understand that I was witnessing something exceptional – a lost tradition, subsequently much romanticised.

But it is true that the San came off particularly badly in Namibia, shot and hunted like vermin. With so much lost opportunities in achieving a relatively early and peaceful Nambia, the *Alte Sudwestlied* sets a more sinister tone:

Weil unsere Sorgen überstrahlt
Der Sonne hell leuchtendes Licht.

(For our sorrows are outshined by the sun's glaring light).

A handful of photos in the book offer light – welcome pitstops on the way. Being well aware of Werner Hillebrecht's treasure trove of historic photographs in the immaculately kept National Archives of Namibia, I sorely missed more photographs and sketches (but then again rather not, if it added more pages to this reading marathon).

I hope a conservationist follows Wallace's example and compiles an equally detailed record of the impact of the "Namibian war" and the period of National Party apartheid on Namibia's wildlife – "the animals that hide in the bush".

This aspect is glaringly absent. But, from South African rule and the eventual retreat from apartheid to the perspective of archaeologist John Kinahan (who wrote the first chapter), *A History of Namibia* is food for thought – and when you reach page 316, you certainly deserve a cold drink on the verandah, while you watch the sun set.

Linda de Jager is a Namibian-born filmmaker whose last series Grensoorlog *dealt with the Namibian Bush War and can currently be seen on Kyknet or as* Bush War *on Mzanzi.*

Lunch with SA writers

THE NEXT Pretoria News/Writers-Speak hosts four writers to talk about their books: Sifiso Mzobe (Sunday Times Fiction prize winner 2011 for his debut title *Young Blood*); Mandy Wiener (*Killing Kebble*); Mike Nicol (*Black Heart*); and Michael Robothom (*The Wreckage*).

The lunch will be held next Friday, July 29, at Pachas, Club 2 Centre, 22 Dely Road, Brooklyn, at noon for 12.30pm.

The cost is R195 for members and R230 for non-members and includes a three-course meal, wine provided by Leopard's Leap and a treat from the Wings Group. Copies of *Young Blood*, *Killing Kebble*, *The Wreckage* and *Black Heart* are up for grabs with prizes from Leopard's Leap, Pachas and WritersSpeak.

To book your seat, call Megan at 012 667 1071 or 083 556 1899 (office hours). – Diane de Beer

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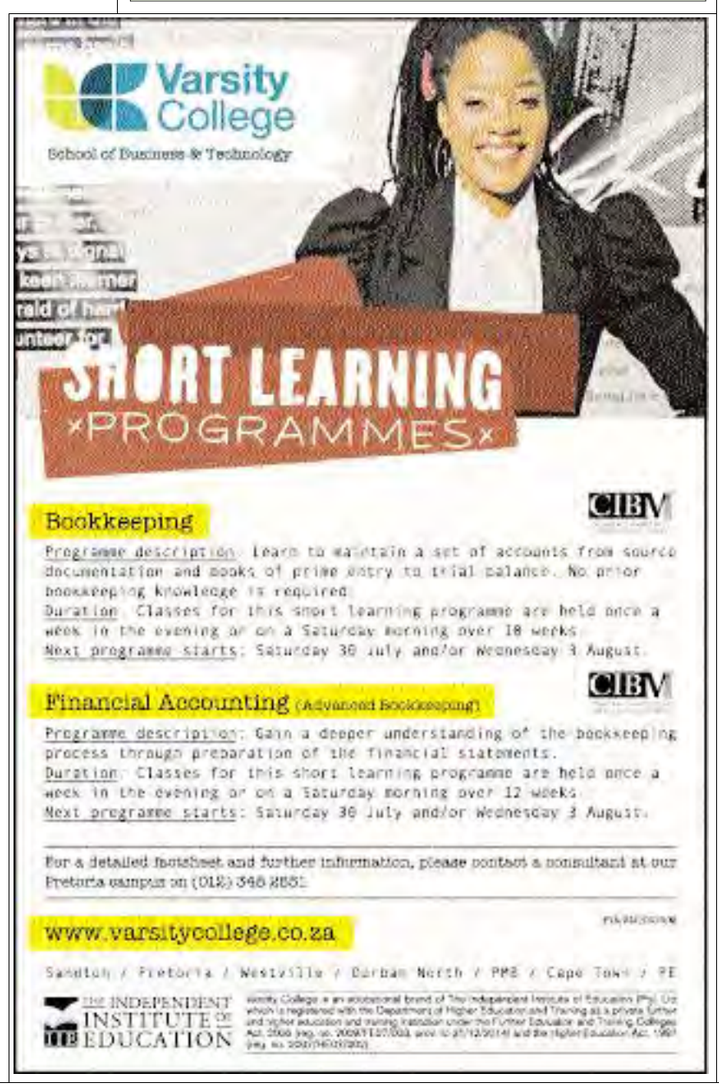

TAKE THE EISH OUT OF tax{eish}ion

Pronunciation: {aysh; eesh}
— interj.
{Origin: South African colloquialism; slang}

1. An interjection used to express the ***sense of dread*** that grows in your stomach as you lie awake at night worrying, and wishing you'd been honest on your tax return.

Tax Season is here.
Eish, man, don't lie on your tax return. Submit it honestly and take the eish out of tax-eish-ion.
SARS At Your Service