

Rediscovery of the magical: on fairy tales,  
feminism, and the new South Africa.

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## Rediscovery of the Magical: On Fairy Tales, Feminism, and the New South Africa

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Rediscovery of the Magical: On Fairy Tales, Feminism, and the  
New South Africa

She believed in the power of imagination, Griet decided, rather than the impotence of reality. She believed in the possibility of love rather than the certainty of death. She believed in stories . . . but was that enough?

—Marita van der Vyver, *Entertaining Angels*

In his 1984 essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," Njabulo Ndebele famously calls for South African authors to direct their energies away from what he terms the "spectacular"—the broad, dramatic presentation of the injustices of the apartheid system—and to "rediscover the ordinary," focusing their attention on the details of the everyday lives of the South African people, thereby producing writing that can "break down the barriers of the obvious in order to reveal new possibilities of understanding and action" (52-53). In the years following its publication, Ndebele's essay has become a touchstone for critical projections about the future of South [End Page 246] African literature.<sup>1</sup> Although much of this work is fascinating, repeated invocation threatens to turn "the ordinary" into an empty catchphrase. In this essay, I suggest that a re-examination of Ndebele's piece demonstrates the flexibility and range of his notion of the ordinary, one that includes not only the quotidian but also, paradoxically, the magical. Ndebele's essay examines three short stories by contemporary black South African writers. The first two examples are realistic treatments of the experiences of young black men. In his discussion of the first, Michael Siluma's calmly analytical story "The Conversion," Ndebele suggests that the ordinary "is sobering rationality; it is the forcing of attention on necessary detail" (53). Next, he praises Joel Matlou, author of "Man Against Himself," for his philosophical insight and his "honest rendering of the subjective experience of his character" (55). But Ndebele then turns to Bheki Meseke's "Mamlambo," in which a woman enlists the help of a magical snake in winning the love of a good man. Ndebele remarks that "Meseke's stories always remind [him] of Haitian paintings: vibrant with colour, a combination of naturalistic and fantastic elements"; nothing would seem further from "sobering rationality," but Ndebele asserts that the tale "is probably the most thematically ordinary" of the stories that he has discussed (56). This third example represents a key shift not only because, as Anthony O'Brien has noted, it turns toward the concerns of women and therefore opens up a space for feminist analysis, but also because it suggests an important role for magic and excess in South African literature.<sup>2</sup> While Ndebele focuses on fiction by black South Africans, his insights about the ordinary can be productively turned to the analysis of literature by white South Africans, not as an excuse for white writers to retreat from the realm of the political—"to go on furlough, to loiter," as Lewis Nkosi has accused white writing of doing (75)—but as a way of positing new and productive directions for postapartheid literature by all South African writers, both black and white. Marita van der Vyver's *Entertaining Angels*, a novel that deliberately positions itself on the threshold of the postapartheid period, offers one set of ways to rediscover the ordinary: it extends Ndebele's gesture toward issues of gender and the magical by asserting the importance of feminism and fairy tales.

*Entertaining Angels*, van der Vyver's first novel, was published in 1992 in Afrikaans as *Griet Skryf 'n Sprokie* (*Griet Tells a Fairy Tale*) and in English translation in 1994. It was wildly popular, and the *South Africa Mail and Guardian* proclaimed it one of the ten most important novels of the [End Page 247] decade. Set in 1990, the novel focuses on Griet Swart, an Afrikaner living in Cape Town who edits and writes fairy tales. In the wake of the stillbirth of her child and the collapse of her marriage to George, a...



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MODERNIST POETRY, even Aristotle in his "Policy" said that the music, acting on a person, delivers "a kind of purification, that is, relief associated with pleasure," but the obligation to

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