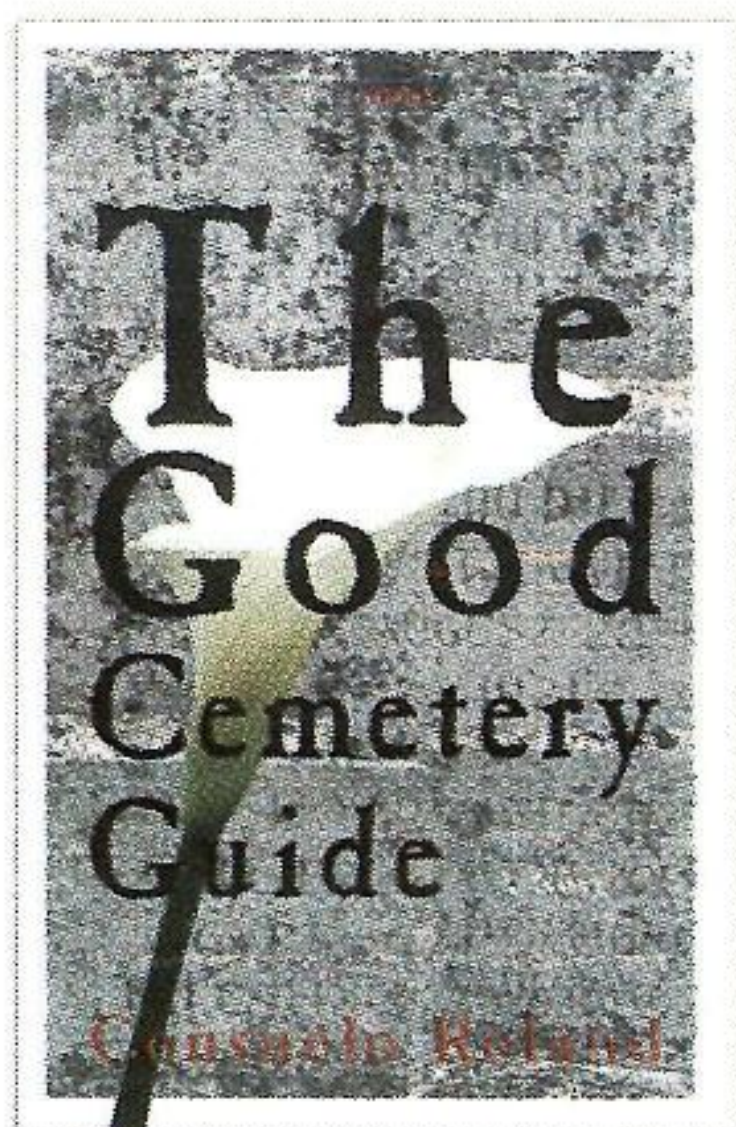


Sunday Times Fiction PRIZE

The Good Cemetery Guide by Consuelo Roland is short-listed for the Sunday Times Fiction Prize. This extract introduces Anthony Junior, the five-year-old son of the Loxton Funeral Parlour's director, as he quietly wonders how his father makes his job look so easy



Sometimes the dead came to life again and inevitably it was a most shocking event, particularly to the mortician who had laid him out



Picture: RUVAN BOSHOFF

Consuelo Roland

Consuelo Roland's quirky first novel was written as part of her master's degree in Creative Writing at UCT, under the mentorship of tutor Ron Irwin. Roland, who is married with a teenaged son, worked in the IT industry for many years before fulfilling her dream of writing. She believes that all authors are permanent writers-in-training. "Even the greats like Marquez and Coetzee are constantly in the process of practising their craft," she says. An "obsessive revisionist", Roland's creed is: Revise, Revise, Revise. "The flow and musicality and tone of the words are particular to a specific piece of writing. It requires enormous patience to hone one's craft, to approach a scene from different angles and rewrite it until it's true to some inner image one has. That listening to the inner voice has to be worked at constantly, it's like training a muscle to do what one wants it to do." The Good Cemetery Guide is the story of a reluctant Kalk Bay undertaker, Anthony Loxton, who moonlights as a rock guitarist in local bars. It is a story about human possibility. "I'm passionate about the untapped potential of human beings and the possibility for joy," she says. Roland is busy with a second novel and is completing a correspondence course with the Institute for Children's Literature in the US.

● *The Good Cemetery Guide* is published by Double Storey, R145

ANTHONY Loxton, five years old, lies in the pink satin comfort and luxury of the coffin with his arms at his sides breathing deeply in and out, with the near certain knowledge of what his father will say. "I'll beat you black and blue," he'll say, pointing to the thick brown scuffed leather belt that once belonged to his grandfather, if he ever finds out what Anthony Junior is doing now.

He hasn't tried to shut the lid, having seen his father struggle with the strange mechanics of getting the heavy lid to drop soundlessly and effortlessly. He has wondered quietly to himself if his father practised for years to make it look easy, because only he seems to see the beads of sweat that gather over the Funeral Director's top lip, the dazzling jewels of the trade.

The lid starts off raised in the air, as magnificently significant as the body raised on the cross that meets the gaze of the Sunday churchgoers as they converge on their faith walking in a straggling line up the aisle, the perfect craftsmanship displayed to the glory of God and community, challenging the dead body within to rise and walk on the waters of memory. Of course sometimes, but rarely, that was exactly what happened, his father had said once. Sometimes the dead came to life again and inevitably it was a most shocking event, particularly to the mortician who had laid him out not suspecting that he was working on a living corpse, and sometimes talking to a living corpse about all sorts of things that one might not want that living corpse to repeat once it stood up and walked off.

He lies there letting his body sink into

the padded scented pink satin. Actually there are a lot of hard lumps that poke into him. He supposes Mrs Stutterheim won't notice. This is the luxury-version casket ordered for Mrs Stutterheim's repose by Mr Stutterheim some months ago when it became clear that Mrs Stutterheim was well on the way to being a dead person due to her lungs having collapsed after she had smoked too many cigarettes. Anthony Loxton has a morbid fascination for his father's work. He loves to hear what people have to say to his father, and he waits for his father to reply in that shining hollow voice. Anthony Loxton shivers to hear his father talk, he has a way about him that Anthony thinks he might copy some day when he also has dead clients.

Anthony is only five, and he looks even younger. Because he is a thin shadowy child without life or fat, other people tend to ignore him. He wanders around the rooms of the Loxton Funeral Parlour waiting for the day to start, wondering who will ring the bell today and what new story of death he will hear, and how his father will listen with that way he has of putting his head on one side, as if he is some great extinct bird, with his huge round protruding eyes and the long thin neck reaching towards the grieving relative or family member with such genuine sympathy, the arms flapping in commiseration, preparing to fly off. He is so moved that Anthony sometimes prepares himself to hold on to him in case he rises off the ground. After he has listened carefully he speaks with such humility and eagerness to serve that the client never leaves without having signed all the forms.

To Anthony there is something mu-

sical about the movement of the forms, how they slide across the desk, back and forth, from hand to hand, the hushed conversation. His father explaining, waiting thoughtfully, his hands the raised roof of a temple, fingertips brought lightly together, index fingers touching his bottom lip, almost praying.

When it is all over he lets them out in stillness, moving his hand out to shake their hand, sometimes putting his second hand over the held hands, cupping them with compassion and reassurance, assuring them that their dead are in the very best hands. Anthony slips into the room after they have left, standing at his side just behind the bony raised shoulder, watching his father write in the bad light. Then, pleased that a deal has been struck, the signature of the bereaved still new on the page, he might ruffle Anthony's dark hair with a quick nervous movement as if his fingers are momentarily lost and uncertain of their way. Sympathy has been expressed as one might expertly milk a teat, but then he has allowed himself to be truly moved as a bird might fly. This is a scene that he enacts on the outskirts of the corpse to be received, the corpse to come, the corpse that holds his total attention with its overwhelming urgent unrequited need to be prepared and buried and laid to rest with respect. Then exhausted, drained with his participation, he turns to find Anthony waiting for more answers than he either knows or is prepared to give.

"What does it feel like to be dead?" Anthony asks. His father looks immensely puzzled and ruffles Anthony's hair in that absent way that begs Anthony to let him remain entombed.