

HARRY MAC

by RUSSELL ELDRIDGE

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SET in sixties Pietermaritzburg, *Harry Mac* is a compelling coming-of-age story based on the author's experience of growing up in the city and on his association with *The Natal Witness* (now *The Witness*), where his father, Stan Eldridge, was the editor.

The story is told by the sensitive boy, Tom MacGregor, who has a bad leg as a result of polio and is, in 1961, the year South Africa was declared a republic, in the final phase of his junior schooling.

His father, Harold, the *Harry Mac* of the title, has newly been appointed as editor of the newspaper. He exhibits tension, irascibility and anger, which sometimes manifests itself in belligerence; is given to protracted moody silences that weigh heavily on his family; and writes provocative anti-government leaders in the press. Dubbed *Wagter* by his father, the boy watches and listens, trying to make sense of the mysterious and menacing adult world that the man inhabits.

This is the world of Hendrik Verwoerd and tightening apartheid legislation; of the threatening Special Branch and of random police raids on suburban *kayas*; of national service in dangerous border localities; of race classification which determines the destinies of given families. Above all, it is the world of growing black anger and activism, driven by the courageous and charismatic, and attracting the militant and reckless.

Harry Mac has fought against the Nazis in World War II. Armed with a pen, he is now fighting against those he perceives as their equivalent, the Nationalists.

The MacGregors' neighbours include

the philosophical Solomon Lieberman, a Jewish doctor working at Town Hill, and his daughter Millie, Tom MacGregor's closest friend and confidante; the politically naive Haas Cockcroft and his Neanderthal son Titch; the sad little Afrikaner Mr de Wet, who cares for his son Arno, victim of a border incident; and a shadowy Mr Lambert, who is under house arrest. There is also, on the corner, the brooding *spookhuis*, in which a man allegedly extinguished his wife and children before shooting himself.

Written from a child's perspective, in an accessible, pacy style, the novel has some affinities with Harper Lee's iconic *To Kill a Mockingbird*: there is the intelligent, if mystified child narrator; a road featuring a miscellany of inhabitants and a so-called ghost-house, intriguing to children; and the housekeeper whose association with the family is close. Further, there is the strong father-figure, who is principled (though *Harry Mac* is rather less gentlemanly and controlled than Atticus Finch) and who risks criticism and controversy – even threat – as he strives for justice. As such, *Harry Mac* would make an excellent companion piece to study with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It will also have resonance for long-standing Maritzburgian residents, who will recognise the landscapes, roads and buildings mentioned in the text.

Russell Eldridge has skilfully woven fact and fiction, sometimes slightly shifting the dates of particular incidents to suit his narrative, to create a thoroughly absorbing, often moving novel.

Harry Mac is a good story, well told.

MOIRA LOVELL