A thought-provoking page-turner

YOU LOST ME
Marita van der Vyver
Translated by Annelize Visser
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REVIEWER: JENNIFER CROCKER

WILLEM PRINS is in Paris. He's there ostensibly to launch a book. Not one of his "great novels", but a bodice-ripper he has written under the pseudonym "Lolita Meyer". It's the way an author of a certain age who has left behind the giddy almost-fame of his younger days makes money but that doesn't mean he has to like it.

Willem Prins is over 50, his literary hopes are fading fast as he is being nipped at the heels by a younger generation of young South African Afrikaans writers.

A bit of a shambling wreck is our Willem; balding, less certain of his abilities, disappointed, and with a string of failed relationships behind him. This isn't easy for a man who was once at the height of his power as a superstar writer in South Africa. A man who seduced a lot of woman, who has been a pretty sketchy father.

Paris is the city he loves, where he met his first love, a woman who is now a wealthy Parisian who has put behind her South African past. She is also the mother of one of Willem's two sons, who when we meet him are lost to him, the one for ever, the other because quite frankly he hasn't been that great as a father.

So, as he trudges through the rainy streets of Paris to the book launch of his doppelganger Lolita Meyer at a rather raunchy bookshop, he is somewhat depressed. He also faces the looming book award where the last novel under his own name is up for a prize. Willem is not at all sure if he will return to South Africa if he doesn't win the prize. In fact, he is not even that sure if he'll bother to continue living.

As he walks through the rainy streets he wonders who will come to the launch of his book. Will it be a flop? But, he has a good evening and dinner with his publisher – a rather unlikely woman to be publishing sexy books, bordering on pornography. Their dinner companion is the owner of the bookshop and his publisher hopes he will write a sequel to Lolita Meyer's book. Willem rather hopes he won't have to.

But, while he is alive and in Paris he hopes that he'll be able to reach some form of rapprochement with his oldest son – to find out if there is a common language they can find, or any common ground.

Marita van der Vyver has drawn together several voices to tell the story of Willem Prins, ex-wives, former lovers, and indeed his own children. He also has a new relationship with Jackie, the fierce and gorgeous young woman who has fled journalism in South Africa so that she can be an au pair in Paris to a wealthy family. The irony is that her mother has been a domestic worker and can't understand why the lovely young woman from Pniel outside Stellenbosch would have taken up this work.

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But Jackie knows exactly why; it's the easiest way for her to escape her life in South Africa and live her dream in Paris.

She turns up at the book signing and asks Willem if she can interview him. He agrees and they meet at a rather pretentious café frequented in the past by great French writers. There is an irony here of two people – one of whom is self-assured, the other not so much – meeting in what seems under the author's skilled hand to be an almost staged affair.

After their night out they find that they have just missed the terror attack on Paris in 2015. Willem and Jackie become an item as they move through a strangely silent city to visit his academic son, who works in a vegan restaurant, and his lovely girlfriend, Nabila.

By using a real-life event, Van der Vyver creates a sort of neutral ground in which Willem and Jackie navigate and try to put in some form of context what has happened. Willem is puzzled in some ways by the reaction of the Parisians. He is appalled by the Islamophobia they witness on the Metro, but also puzzled by the people of Paris seeming to need to identify with their city.

They are both in the city and outside of it. In this strangely suspended space Willem Prins tells us the story of his life, with a chorus of commentary from those who have played a role in it, and may continue to unless he makes one last decision which will mean there is no future to play a role in.

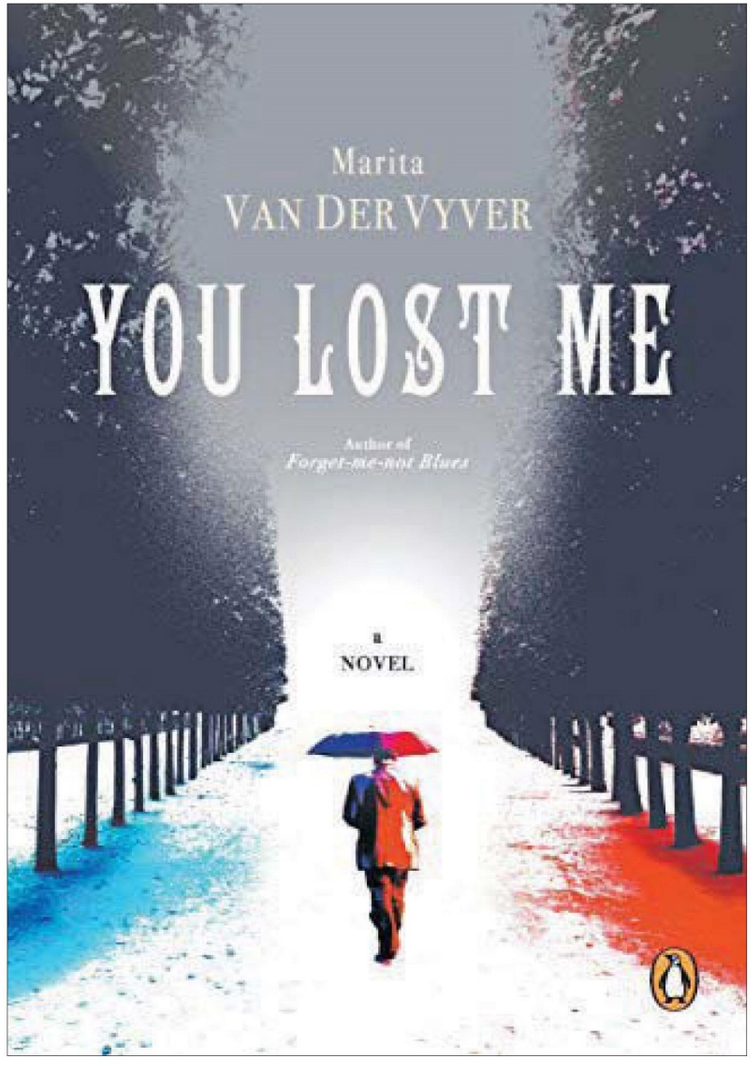
Those who are au fait with the Afrikaans literary scene will probably recognise some of the digs (none malicious, more playful) that the author suggests are due to some authors in the Afrikaans world of writers.

Some of them will imagine they know exactly what communal artists' farm it was where Willem met one of his loves.

This is one of those novels that draws the reader in somewhat slowly and then takes one by the throat and compels you to devour every drop. While it is a story set in a very real time it is also an everyman or everywoman tale which begs the question: How do we know when we have nothing left to offer, and in fact can it ever be our decision?

Well-crafted and with characters you will engage with as they come alive under Van der Vyver's pen, this is a delightful book.

I had reservations about whether Willem Prins was old enough to suffer the degree of failure he feels, but this reaction is not borne out by life. After all, we can feel defeated at 30 and omnipotent at 70. It's a question of where we stand in life and what we think of our lives.



Van der Vyver has long been one of my favourite authors and this book does not disappoint. A lovely, thoughtful and thought-provoking read.