

# Zulu worrier

A children's tale set in a game park rests heavily on racial clichés about South Africans

**THE WHITE GIRAFFE**

by Lauren St John

Orion Children's Books £9.99

192 pages

Review by Michael Holman

When 11-year-old Martine Allen, orphaned and forlorn, leaves London and arrives in Cape Town, a passenger "reaches out a damp pink paw" to pat her on the shoulder: "Cheer up love. You're in Africa now." You could have fooled me. The heroine of *The White Giraffe* has been transported not to South Africa, but to Ersatz Africa, where racial caricatures and stereotypes thrive in a post-apartheid fantasy-land of dominant whites and docile blacks.

The tale itself, aimed at 10- to 14-year olds, is a good one, even if sometimes laboriously told. Martine, who has lost her parents in the fire that destroyed the family home in England, has gone to live at Sawubona, a game reserve owned by her strangely unwelcoming grandmother. She soon discovers that she possesses a supernatural affinity with animals which allows her to befriend Jemma, a young albino giraffe. Accompanied by a Zulu game warden called Tendai, Martine explores the African bush, and a series of splendid adventures culminates in her foiling a gang of animal smugglers.

The author makes much of the fact that the first 16 years of her life were spent on a farm in what, until 1980, was white-ruled Rhodesia. It becomes clear in the first few pages of her book that whatever this may have taught her about Africa's animals, there remains something of the settler in her portrayal of Africa's people.

How else does one explain the following: every white character has a first name and a surname, while the handful of black characters – except a boy called Xhosa Washington – are given only one name, a feature they

share with Jemma the giraffe and Shaka the elephant?

So the two main black characters are simply Tendai and his aunt Grace – not so much characters as caricatures. Tendai reflects that pathological affinity many whites claim to have with Zulus: he is "a mahogany giant" of a man, with "an amazing smile", a "voice like a bass drum", who "carries nature with him almost like an aura" and says "yebo" not "yes".

Grace is no better. This "wonderful" cook puts her hand on the girl's forehead, and feels an "electric current pass through her". "You have the gift, chile," she exclaims, using words and phrases associated with the southern states of the US rather than South Africa. By now anyone familiar with the genre will have guessed: Grace is a *sangoma*, or traditional healer.

If an author sets their work, albeit a fantasy, in contemporary South Africa, and uses their African upbringing to assert a certain authenticity, I believe they have a responsibility to

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observe reality. Yes, I know. This is a children's book. All the more reason to be concerned when characterisation depends on ethnic caricatures, racial clichés and old stereotypes. Grace warns Martine: "There be many, many challenges to come... and a whole lotta adventures before you're done." Perhaps the greatest adventure will be Martine's discovery that Africa is populated by Africans, as well as animals.

*Michael Holman, brought up in Zimbabwe, was Africa editor at the FT from 1986-2002.*