

Crooked Seeds

KAREN JENNINGS

About the author

Karen Jennings is a South African writer whose novel *An Island* was longlisted for the Booker Prize. She lives in Cape Town and is a writer-in-residence at the Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past, Stellenbosch University.

About the book

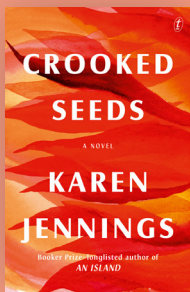
In her parched, crumbling corner of a Cape Town public housing complex, Deidre van Deventer receives a call from the police. The remains of several bodies have just been unearthed from her family's former home, after decades underground. Detectives pepper her with questions about her brother, and his dealings with a pro-apartheid group in the 1990s with terrorist leanings.

Deidre doesn't know the answers to most of these questions. All she knows is that she was denied—repeatedly—the life she felt she deserved. But as alarming evidence from the investigation continues to surface, and detectives pressure her to share what she knows of her family's disturbing past, Deidre must finally confront her own shattered memories so that something better might emerge from what remains. *Crooked Seeds* is a singularly powerful novel, in exquisitely spare prose, about the ways we become trapped in prisons of our own making.

Discussion questions

1. The characters in *Crooked Seeds* seem to live in a harsh and unforgiving society. What do you think the author is commenting on by centring Deidre's point of view?
2. How would you describe Deidre's relationship with her daughter? How does your understanding of this relationship evolve over the course of the novel?
3. How do you think Deidre's upbringing reveals itself in the way she sees and talks about others?
4. Karen Jennings writes about the body in an unflinching, visceral way. Discuss how this affects our reading of her characters.
5. 'Memories tricking her, making her believe her childhood had been nothing but water, always water.' (p97) Discuss the use of water as a symbol throughout the novel. How do these references make you feel?
6. Sections of the novel are presented from Deidre's mother Trudy's point of view. What does this add to the narrative, and how does it shape our understanding of the family?
7. What is Deidre's response when she discovers her brother may have committed a serious crime? How does she rationalise his actions?
8. 'But he had come back. Her boy had come back. Here he was as she opened her eyes. Sitting in the chair as though he had been here all night just like he'd promised he would be.' (p157) Discuss the conversations between Trudy and her imagined Ross. Why do you think Ross is appearing to Trudy now? Discuss the dynamic between them.
9. Discuss the book's title, *Crooked Seeds*. What do you think this is referring to?
10. On the last page, Deidre calls Detective Mabombo, saying, 'I need to talk to you,

Fiction



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'I need to tell you something.' (p359) How does this simple phone call mark a change in her character?