

# Review

## *Unconfessed*

*Yvette Christiansë (Kwela Books, South Africa, 2007)*

*Reviewed by Karen Hurt*

**U***nconfessed* is the story of Sila van den Kaap, an early 19th century slave. She was abducted from Mozambique as a young girl, and sold into farm labour in the Cape Colony.

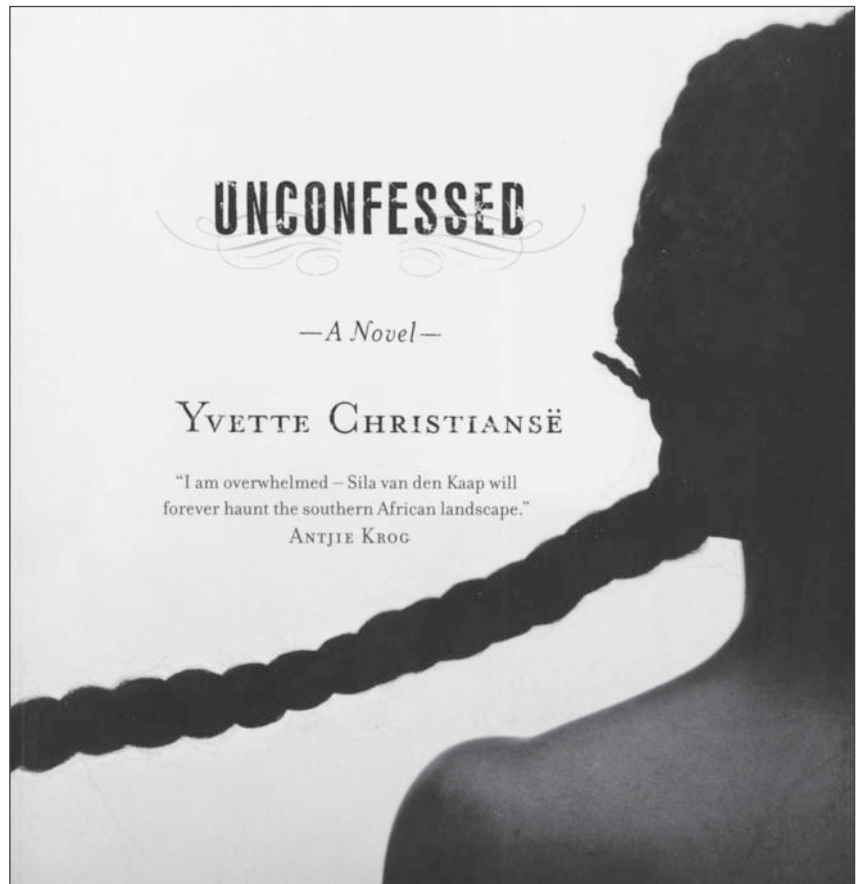
The reader first meets Sila in a Cape Town prison, where she faces the gallows for murdering her son, Baro. She is granted a reprieve and her death sentence is commuted to 14 years' hard labour on Robben Island, where she breaks stones in the quarry and works in the warden's kitchen.

It is from Robben Island that most of Sila's story is told in the first person and, poignantly, to Baro. Sila's vivid flashbacks draw the reader into her past, and in a suspenseful journey, to the circumstances that led to her killing her son. Over and above the wrenching and poetic narrative, what makes *Unconfessed* compelling is that it is based on the life of a real person.

South African-born Yvette Christiansë spent ten years trawling through colonial archives to find a slave on whom she could base a story. Eventually, she came upon a reference in the records to Sila van den Kaap. This was a time during which Christiansë speaks of 'haunting the past'. In an interview she explained, "I became the haunting. Sometimes I think that it's not the dead who haunt the living. It is the living who haunt the dead."

Because of the obvious limitations of colonial records, in creating her fictional account of Sila's life, Christiansë says she "listened to the silences".

Robben Island provides the main setting from which Sila has



flashbacks. She illuminates scenes from the time she was captured and throughout her time of being moved from master to master, farm to farm, and various prisons. The flashbacks are not in chronological order. Presenting the dramatic unfolding of what Sila endured in this way creates a destabilisation resonant with the physical and psychological upheaval and trauma of slavery. This extract is about Sila's capture in Mozambique as a very young child:

"That day they came - all the way back there where I was born - it was as if we were just useless things that did not even have legs to run. Our

mouths made noises that made no sense. The village was not a village. We were not people... And then I saw the whipping... Then, in all that noise, all sound was sucked out of the air... On that day the world changed itself and it leaned so hard that we poured into a place from which all our generations will have to struggle to leave."

On Robben Island, Baro 'visits' her. It is to him that Sila recounts her life and reflections, both on the Island and before it, in the intimate style of a mother who adores her child. This is his first visit. "Baro? Baro! Hai, boy? Is this you? Can it be you? My boy!

This is a good day. Stand over here. Let me see you. My boy. My lovely boy. I knew you would not forget your mother. I knew you would come. My clever boy, finding your mother all this way out on the water. Stand here where I can see you. Ja. Ja. It is exactly as I thought. All those bruises, gone! My boy, have you any idea how much your mother has missed you?"

When referring to 'those bruises' Sila is talking about the immeasurable cruelty that Van der Wat and his wife vented on them. Baro was a thorn in their flesh because he looked so much like Van der Wat. Here Sila gives a hint of what led her to 'free' her son.

"But no demon whipped as hard as Van der Wat. And when the whip was not enough, he used his fists. Boff, boff! I remember. I think about it. He put those fists all over my head, especially in my ears and then my eyes... Aiy! But old Van der Wat had a devil in his poephoh. He was like a dog with worms, crazy with the crawling. But these worms were in his head. You could see him scratching. Do you remember how crazy he was? ... My poor boy. Forgive your mother talking of such things. Some days I think how would it have been if I had turned that knife on Van der Wat and the missus."

Van der Wat was not the only man who raped Sila and from whom she bore children. In Cape Town prison, the guards sold her for sex, and on Robben Island, guards regularly broke into the women prisoners' huts at night. Inevitably, the women became pregnant and bore children. In this extract, the warden, Pedder, is furious when he sees Sila's swelling belly.

"The warden curses me, he curses the guards. He asks me, who, who? I ask him for bigger candles to see in the dark."

A strong thread running through the novel is the immense love that Sila has for her children, no matter how or from whom they were conceived, or for how long they clung to life. It traumatises her that slavery prevented her from being the kind of mother she yearned to be.

"Ag, and what good did I ever do for my children? I do not want to talk any more. Let me rest. My head aches and there is a worm in my heart. Do you think there could be something inside us that makes us slaves and them our masters and mistresses?"

Christiansë's Sila van den Kaap is strident, vivid and wild. She has a biting tongue and a mind that cuts through façades. She lived in a time when slaves could be granted freedom, and she had been granted hers by Oumiesies, in her will. But

Van der Wat, who was Oumiesies' son, tricked her out of it. Sila's fury simmers through the story. She is particularly scathing of oppressors' religious pursuits. She will have nothing to do with their gods and their hypocrisy.

"Sometimes she [Sila] imagined that swine Van der Wat and his family pronking off to prayers at a neighbour's farm with their pious stout faces served up on the platter of their holy words like vet little piglets snorting in the Lord's trough."

*Unconfessed* is a much-needed contribution to the African continent's literature about slavery. Christiansë's solid research has resulted in a novel that rings with authenticity. With the continued exploitation and oppression of the most vulnerable workers, and particularly the brutality against women, 200 years ago seems a very short time.

Long, long after I put down *Unconfessed*, Sila rucked at me. I think she always will. LB

*Karen Hurt was editor of 'SPEAK' women's magazine. She is a freelance writer, materials developer, editor and trainer and is completing her MA in Writing at the University of the Witwatersrand.*

## About the author

Yvette Christiansë was born in Johannesburg, South Africa and also lived in Cape Town. She left South Africa with her family when she was 18 years old to escape apartheid and she has lived in Swaziland, Australia, and the United States.

Christiansë teaches African-American and post-colonial literature and poetry at Fordham University in New York City, USA. She has also written *Castaway*, a poetry collection set on the island of St Helena, off the west coast of Africa. This was a port of call for the slave trade. It was also where Christiansë's grandmother was born. Her poems have been translated into isiNdebele, Sepedi, Setswana, siSwati, Sesotho, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, French and Italian.

*Unconfessed* was a finalist in the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for a Distinguished First Book of Fiction.