



A Blade of Grass

By Lewis DeSoto
ISBN: 9780060554279

Introduction

Set on Kudufontein, a remote farm on the border between South Africa and an unnamed country in the 1970s, *A Blade of Grass* is a charged and complex exploration of apartheid and its consequences. The story centers on Märit Laurens, a young woman of British descent, orphaned and recently married to Ben, whom she joins to live on their newly purchased farm. Not long after their arrival, violence strikes at the heart of Märit's world, leaving her alone and isolated. Devastated, alone, but determined to keep the farm running, Märit turns for companionship and guidance to her young black housekeeper, Tembi, who is in a similar predicament but for different reasons.

Soon Märit finds herself in the middle of a simmering battle between the local Afrikaner community that surrounds her farm and the black workers who live on it, with both vying for control over her land in the wake of tragedy. Facing obstacles of biblical proportions, Tembi and Märit forge a close bond,

relying on each other, what's left of their land, and their wits to survive.

Strangers and wanderers insinuate themselves into their sheltered world, including Michael, the mute musician who charms their farmyard animals, and Khoza, a mysterious, sinister figure who upsets the tenuous peace and security Tembi and Märit have found in each other. Perhaps the greatest threat to their world is the encroaching civil war and its soldiers who stir up conflicting loyalties that turn Märit and Tembi's fight for the farm into a struggle for their lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. At the beginning of *A Blade of Grass*, how does Märit feel about the farm and the land she renames "Kudufontein"? How do her feelings change over the course of the novel?
2. How would you describe Ben's feelings about his farm and the land? What seems to motivate those feelings? How do they differ from Märit's and why? Did Märit's response to his death strike you as unusual in any way?
3. How would you characterize the nature of the relationship between Tembi and Märit? What are some of the obstacles to their closeness? How does tragedy impact their individual lives? What threatens to divide them?
4. What is significant about Märit's decision to wear a sarong, go barefoot, and shear her hair? Why might such behavior be interpreted as a challenge to neighbors like Eloise Pretorius and Connie van Staden? Why does Märit get a cold reception at Patel's Haberdashery in Klipspring?
5. In *A Blade of Grass*, the word apartheid is never used to describe the codified racial boundaries that existed in South Africa between blacks and whites. What are some of the physical and social aspects of apartheid that struck you in this book? Can you think of ways in which blacks and whites in this novel reject outright racist attitudes? Or, how do they embrace them?
6. "Today you pay me ... but tomorrow I will pay you. Both of you!," says bossboy Joshua. How does he make good on his threats against Tembi and Märit? Do you feel that his frustration and anger were justified in any way? How did you feel when his behavior was avenged by Tembi?
7. How does Khoza's arrival on the farm change the dynamic between Tembi and Märit? What aspects of Khoza's personality make Märit distrust him? Were you surprised when she allowed him to take her rifle? How would you characterize Khoza's loyalties to Märit and Tembi? Does his behavior toward the black soldiers complicate your understanding of his loyalty?
8. "I wouldn't lower myself to his level," says Märit. Why does she lie to Tembi about what happens between her and Khoza? How does this lie affect their friendship? Does this remark reflect a change or prejudice in Märit's attitudes?
9. Why do Khoza and Tembi force Märit out of her home? Why does she choose not to fight them, or punish them even when she has a clear opportunity to do so? Were you surprised that Tembi would betray Märit like this? Do you believe that Khoza and Tembi were justified in their actions? Why or why not?
10. *A Blade of Grass* opens and closes with the image of seeds that Tembi intends to plant. How does this image undergo a transformation over the course of the novel? How do the original seeds nourish Tembi and Märit at various points in the book? What do the seeds at the end of the book represent?

About the Author

Lewis DeSoto was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa. He was awarded the Books in Canada/Writers' Union Short Prose Award, and his writing has been published in numerous journals. A past editor of *Literary Review of Canada*, DeSoto lives with his wife in Normandy and Toronto.