

## Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves

### Synopsis

Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves

(Älykkäät kuin käärmeet, viattomat kuin kyyhkysset)

Lauri Mäkinen

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300 pages

The events of the novel start in 1924 in Ovamboland, German South-West Africa, when Tobias Johansson, an elderly Finnish Lutheran missionary, is woken up by Martta, one of his parishioners. She informs him that the old chapel is on fire.

Tobias discovers a badly injured woman, Inene, in the yard. She is a midwife and wealthy businesswoman. He also believes he sees a charred body in the chapel.

When Tobias consults Toivo, the heir to the throne of Ondonga, he discovers that Nankalu, the chief seer, is holding a smelling-out ceremony. Nankalu names Martta as the witch responsible for the fire.

Tobias sets out to protect Martta and her son and to prove her innocence. He speaks with Major Chaption, the Officer in Charge of Native Affairs.

The back story sets out the events leading to the arrival of Tobias and his colleagues, including Alfons Nurkka, in Ovamboland. As the years passed, Tobias and Alfons struggled to convert the locals, build their chapel and establish the mission. A young missionary, Jaakko Brohuvud, arrived.

As the story returns to 1924, Tobias discovers a knife of German manufacture in the ruins. At first he suspects the body in the chapel is Inene's husband Aantu. As Aantu then returns from his hunting trip and Inene is soon after found stabbed to death in the hospital, Tobias accuses Aantu of arson and murder. Aantu is able to prove his innocence.

Past events describe how Tobias met up with Namene, a pregnant young royal who had slipped out of the birthing hut. Later he hears that she gave birth whilst on one of these outings. She invites him to the naming ceremony for Amunime, the young prince. Tobias senses this to be his opportunity to make a difference and is happy to take on the tutoring of the prince.

The Lutheran missionaries' position is strengthened by their special relationship with the German administration for whom they provide services. The rewards they receive include a serum for cattle.

Namene asks the missionaries to vaccinate Inene's cattle at the same time as the royal herd. Tobias agrees.

Inene tells Tobias about local customs, including one that demands the strangling of twins born to a royal mother who herself would also be violently punished. In his diary, Tobias describes his feelings about his love affair with Inene.

Battles between colonial forces bring famine to the area. Lutherans, Anglicans and Catholics become sworn enemies. Disease and hunger take their toll amongst the native population and the mission. No mail has been received for years so everyone is overjoyed when the first letters arrive, brought by Dr Anthony Reed, a British biologist. He soon becomes firm friends with Alfons and Jaakko. He is the one who tells them of a rumour about a missionary having an affair with a native woman in the old chapel.

Jaakko finally succeeds in converting Ileni, a heathen he has been determined to bring to God and whose son works for the royal household. He re-names him Jakob.

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Amunime, the restless young prince, agrees to convert to Christianity. Tobias baptises him Toivo, the Finnish word for 'hope'.

As Tobias continues his investigation into the fire, he finds a man with stab wounds. However, before being able to tend to the man, he is called to the hut where Jakob lies stabbed to death. Tobias is concerned that the deed may have been carried out by Jaakko who had been enraged by Jakob's return to his heathen ways.

Tobias goes back to the mission where there is a struggle resulting in the arrest of Kapongo, the wounded man. Though he has no tongue, he is taken for interrogation and torture. Eventually Tobias shoots him as he can no longer stand the man's suffering.

Tobias consults his diaries and goes to confront Namene with his suspicions. She tells him that she had suspected she was pregnant with twins and did not want them to be killed at birth. She had escaped from the birthing hut and sought Inene to deliver them. She then dispatched Ileni to take one of the boys elsewhere for safety. She rewarded him with a position for his son in the royal court. She bought Kapongo, a slave, and gave him his freedom in case she needed someone's loyalty in the future. She paid Inene in cattle. Namene admits to arranging for Kapongo to kill Inene and Ileni/Jakob, but denies arson.

On his return to the mission, Tobias is summoned to Major Chapton. Before setting off he demands that Alfons and Jaakko tell him what happened during the fatal night.

They inform him they had seen a light in the chapel and remembering the rumour, they went to check what was going on. They discovered that Reed had settled there for the night. They also found out that he was an Anglican priest. In the scuffle that followed, Reed was stabbed with his own knife and the missionaries set the chapel on fire although Reed was still alive.

Meanwhile, Inene had seen the fire and rushed to check if Tobias was in danger.

Tobias goes to see Chapton and tells him that it would be better not to mention the body in the chapel. After all, it would not look good if it were known that Reed had been having a liaison with a native.

Tobias sees Toivo mounting a horse. The prince says he overheard the conversation between Tobias and his mother. He now knows he has missed his twin all his life and goes in search of his brother.

### Reader's report

Lauri Mäkinen, the author of *Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves*, works as a public relations consultant. This book is his first published novel. He has higher education degrees in international politics and commerce. He began his research into the history of Ovamboland, part of modern-day Namibia, with the intention of creating a fictional world in which to set a story, but on discovering the amount of information he had collected, decided to write a historical novel instead.

This book was shortlisted for the Helsingin Sanomat Best Debut Novel in 2015, and in 2016 Mäkinen received the Finnish Crime Novel Association's Diploma of Honour for a Debut Crime Novelist.

With chapters alternating between 1924 and flashbacks to earlier time periods, Mäkinen has skilfully woven historical details and traditions into a murder mystery. The story is classed as a crime novel, though it would perfectly well fit into the genre of historical fiction.

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Despite the fact that the suspense continues until the very last lines of the novel, the mystery often gives way to descriptions of historical events. Conflicts between the colonial powers as well as the rivalries between the churches of different Christian denominations are shown to take their toll on the native population. The missionaries impose their own moral and ethical codes on the indigenous people, at times causing pain and suffering, as is the case with Martta whom Tobias persuades to enter and stay in an abusive marriage. The novel thus throws light on lesser known aspects of Christian missionary life in an area that is rarely the subject of fiction published in the English-speaking world.

In an interview, Mäkinen himself acknowledged his conflicting relationship with the character of Tobias during the writing of the novel: “I understood his motives but on the other hand his focus on the mission and his morals made him a difficult person. I didn’t always know if I should respect, despise or possibly pity him.”

Indeed, at the end of the novel Tobias emerges as a broken man. It appears he has lost everything: his marriage has remained childless and his relationship with his wife has become strained over the years; Inene, his former lover, has not only died but appears to have been having a relationship with another man. And now Toivo, whose conversion to Christianity had seemed to justify everything, decides to ride off in search of his twin. As Tobias has also just covered up for a murder committed by his brothers-in-faith, his destruction seems complete.

Although the book could benefit from the prose being tightened up to cut down on some repetitive descriptions, it makes up for this by an intricately plotted mystery. This thought-provoking novel opens up a historical time that deserves attention.

Compiled by Heidi Gilhooly

[heidipilhooly@gmail.com](mailto:heidipilhooly@gmail.com)