

LIFE

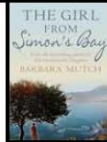
Love song to Simon's Town in days of yore

Romantic tale sheds light on darkness of apartheid era, writes **Vivien Horler**



HISTORY AT A GLANCE: Looking up Alfred Lane to the Noor al Islam mosque.

The Girl from Simon's Bay
Barbara Mutch
(Allison & Busby,
Jonathan Ball)



BARBARA Mutch has written a love story about a nurse and a Royal Navy officer during World War II, but she has also written what is really a love song to a Simon's Town that in many ways is no longer there.

Of course the dockyard and the Victorian buildings and even the sailors are still in evidence; but, until 1967, a community lived up behind the buildings lining St George's Street – the main road – in the streets around Thomas Street and Alfred Lane, Water Lane and Ricketts Close.

Today there is almost nothing to remind you of that community, until you see the sign pointing up Alfred Lane. And up a short steep climb you come to the Noor al Islam mosque, founded in 1878 and rebuilt in 1926. The houses around it have glorious views down the hill to Simon's Bay and its yachts and ships, to the sea and the sky and the mountains surrounding the bay.

And then the Group Areas Act came like a sledgehammer and the coloured people were forced out, most of them to the ironically named Ocean View, a place with no view of the sea at all.

They were fishermen and dockyard workers, people who made a living from the sea and, when they were moved, much of that connection was lost. There were buses, but it was an undertaking to use public transport to and from Ocean View when, before, work had been a 10-minute walk away, and Seaforth Beach 15 minutes away.

What is more, Simon's Town lost a large part of its community.

But I'm doing an injustice to Mutch, who does not want her book to be a political read. It is a love story set at a particular time, against a particular background.

"I wanted my love story to carry this, to be the vehicle for all of this, so that it isn't just a story of grimness but of love and hope."

The story opens in the 1920s and centres on Louise Ahrendts, a pretty little coloured girl whose father is a mechanic in the dockyard. They live in Ricketts Terrace, which runs parallel to



BROEKIE LACE: One of the posh houses in today's Ricketts Close.

PICTURES: VIVIEN HORLER

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the main road. Her great friend is Piet Philander, son of a Seaforth fisherman, and the two children spend hours on the beach, collecting shells and swimming between the boulders.

At a time when the future for young coloured girls tended to be domestic service, Louise decides she wants to be a healer and, after hard work and much determination, is accepted to train as a nurse at Victoria Hospital.

When war breaks out in 1939, Simon's Town's importance as a Royal Navy base is underlined, and many naval ships call in. Louise moves from Victoria to False Bay Hospital (then in Simon's Town) and from there is transferred to the Royal Naval Hospital on the hill above the town.



GLORIOUS VISTA: Barbara Mutch and the view of Simon's Bay.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED

There she meets a patient, Lieutenant-Commander David Horrocks, and slowly love blooms. But, even in the early 1940s a relationship between a coloured nurse and a Royal Navy officer was frowned on, from both sides of the colour line, and they have to keep their relationship secret.

Can their love endure? And, assuming David survives, can they possibly have a future together? To say more would give the story away, but Mutch has written an absorbing and tender love story with a twist.

The story is backed by detailed research. She based David's character on the experiences of four real Royal Navy officers of a similar age, finding the information in the UK's Imperial War Museum. Louise's backstory was more difficult, and Mutch says she was helped enormously by Patty Davidson of the Simon's Town Heritage Museum who has made it her life's work to document, record and research the lives of the people who were forced out of Simon's Town, including herself.

Were there young coloured nurses at Victoria, False Bay and the Royal Naval hospitals during the war? Mutch says she has not been able to prove the case either way, and the authorities here have been unable to help.

Mutch, born and bred in South Africa, lives near Guildford in Surrey with her British-born husband. But, before they settled in the UK, they bought a house in Ricketts Close, a steep street that runs up

the mountain from Thomas Street, and they spend several months a year there. It has glorious views of Simon's Bay.

"Cape Town spoils you for everywhere in the world," says Mutch, during an interview under an oak tree at the Vineyard Hotel, with the mountain soaring behind us.

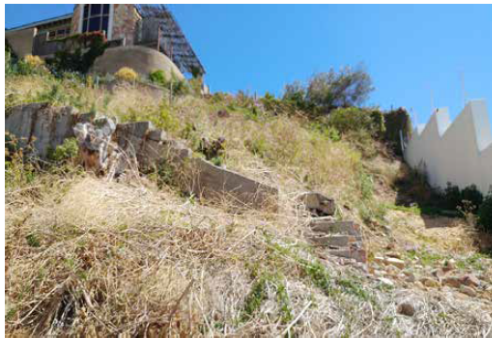
She says when the coloured people were moved from Simon's Town, their houses stayed empty and slowly crumbled.

"The removals were controversial, and no one wanted to knock them down. Then, about 15 years later, the council demolished them and new houses were built on the land – houses for whites, of course. The thing was, the municipality and the town lost a lot of income when the coloureds left. The municipality needed new ratepayers and to bring the place back to life.

"We bought our house 22 years after the evictions, and didn't appreciate that at the time, that we were living in the midst of what had been a coloured community who were made to go. And this inspired me to turn the area into the background for my book."

Today, the new houses above the sea are dazzlingly white, set off by pink hibiscus and purple and magenta bougainvillea. But if you look, here and there you can see the ghosts of other dwellings, odd stairways leading nowhere.

Stories like this remind us that the past is not forgotten.



GHOSTS: Odd stairways leading nowhere give a glimpse into the area's past.