

*7 Steps to Heaven* is primarily the story of the friendship between Sizwe and Thulani, childhood friends who grow up in a government-workers' township ("it's a suburb, they say, a suburb") Exclusive Park. Thulani is the charismatic, independent child of Father Thembe, an Anglican priest with unresolved sexuality issues. Sizwe is hardworking, quietly determined, and desperately jealous of his best friend – who, most unforgivably, seems to have better luck with girls than he does. The bildungsroman portion of the novel is the most charming, relating with affectionate humour the duo's first encounters with sex, with the Shebeens, with petty criminality, and, gradually, with love. The turning point of the novel comes when both Sizwe and Thulani discover the self-creative power of writing, and through this confront the confusions and resolutions of adulthood. The playfulness of the first half of the novel here gives way to a more sinister plot concerning violence, revenge and madness; and the relationship between Sizwe and Thulani becomes ever more multi-faceted.

*7 Steps to Heaven* is a page-turner right to the very end; the plot drives the reader forcefully to its conclusion, which is unexpected and thought-provoking. Khumalo's journalist-trained eye misses nothing of the details that give a place its uniqueness. His portrait of the deluded pretentiousness of Exclusive Park is animated and ironically witty, and (as he demonstrated in *Bitches Brew*) he understands the subtle politics that make Shebeen life such an enticing aspect to his novels. So refreshingly for a South African writer, his novels are about real people, and never degenerate into simple political polemics.

Khumalo has presented South Africa with a book it has long needed; a humanistic tale about township culture that demonstrates an intimacy and sensitivity with the subject that gives it universal appeal. Challenging and intelligent as the book may be, what really makes it endearing is the sweetness of Khumalo's humour. It is a book you cannot help enjoying.