

# Rayda Jacobs' *Confessions of a Gambler*<sup>1</sup>

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With four successful works already under her belt, Rayda Jacobs is well on her way to becoming an accomplished novelist. Her first offering, *The Middle Children*, was a collection of short stories that was published in Canada, where she lived for many years before returning to South Africa. The trilogy that followed comprised *Eyes of the Sky*, *The Slave Book* and *Sachs Street*, and was set in Cape Town where she grew up and now once again lives.

*Confessions of a Gambler* is her 5<sup>th</sup> and latest offering. It is the touching story of a woman, a Cape Muslim woman, who gambles, who smokes, but is devoutly attached to her culture and religion. It is the story of a rejected wife (her husband abandons her for another woman), an accepting mother (her one son is gay), a true friend (taking in one of her friends when she has marital problems) and an unselfish lover (sacrificing love so that her sister can find happiness). It is also essentially a story of a woman's struggle to forgive herself.

The story is set in modern day Cape Town, but the themes are so universal that it could be taking place anywhere. The protagonist, Abeeda Ariefdien, is introduced to gambling during a fun day out with one of her friends. In the Islamic tradition gambling is forbidden (*haraam*), but she is only doing it for fun and reckons that

she'll never win. But she does! And Beeda is hooked. Throughout the book we experience her visits to Aunty (the name she gives the casino). We share her joy when she wins and her agony is ours when she loses. The problem deteriorates to such a level that she has to borrow money from her domestic worker. She becomes desperate, but finally realizes that she is an addict when she scams the theft of her own car and becomes involved in insurance fraud. One feels for Beeda, as one would feel for anybody with an addiction, any addiction. The addict needs to admit to the problem and because many fail to do so, they never recover from their plight. Beeda saves herself by realizing that she is losing control – a situation that she refuses to be in.

The book is not only about her gambling escapades. On several occasions we are taken back a decade or two. These flashbacks help us to put everything into place. Why Reza's name isn't mentioned in family circles, and why she and Imran (her sister Zulfa's husband) avoid each other.

I do not think that it is coincidence that the author tackles issues such as polygamy and homosexuality so frequently in the book. These are two extremely sensitive issues in religious communities, more so in the Muslim community. Polygamy is accepted, while homosexuality is not. I think the author wants to make a strong statement about this. Beeda is not an ignorant woman; she knows her religion, taught to her by a progressive Muslim cleric, Abdul, who gets murdered. Later we find out that he was gay and murdered by a jilted lover. This brings to mind the incident of a local Muslim

cleric who was sacked from his teaching post at a progressive Muslim school for confessing to the media that he was homosexual. Furthermore, Beeda's youngest child is dying of AIDS. These are unspoken issues in the community. The question that naturally arises, then, is "How fictitious is fiction?" These are real issues, in real communities that need to come to terms with such pressing human dilemmas.

Two brothers are reconciled when one is on the brink of death. Two lovers are brought back together under the most fateful of circumstances. Jacobs writes with the kind of pathos that draws the reader totally into the story. For me this is the success of any novel, and therefore *Confessions* is totally believable.

Although the story is set in a middle-class Muslim milieu in Cape Town, South Africa, it makes no mention of the historic struggles that have been fought in our country in the last 20 years; this is in my opinion a serious shortcoming. Could it be that because the author herself was not part of these struggles (having lived for so long in Canada) that her characters are so totally removed from them? A second shortcoming would be the "Confession." Throughout the work we enter the inner sanctum of Beeda's mind. Her intimate thoughts and feelings are laid bare for all to see. However, at no time in the book, I feel, does she genuinely repent for her "misdeeds." While I am by no means asserting the moral high ground, the point is that confession and repentance ultimately go together.

*Confessions of a Gambler* is a human story. Needless to say, the book is not without its comic moments. Jacobs has her pulse on her community. I read it in one sitting, was totally engrossed and believe that many more will be. Rayda Jacobs must keep the creative ink flowing. Having not previously read any of her work, I for one have become a fan.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs, Rayda. 2003. *Confessions of a Gambler*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.