

"If the muse flirts with you in Newtown, you must be glad, even if she plays hard to get in Kensington. If she's kind to you in Newtown — Newtown, you know? — then she's interested in you. And if she spurns you in Kensington, that's all right. She wants you to get to know something about her."

But the story "Knowledge" ends with the deaths of both Mr de Waal and Felix's friend and fellow-spastic, Edwin. And from his first knowledge of death and art, Felix moves in the next story, "The Moment", to his first carnal knowledge.

In the last story "Invisible Worm" Felix's relationship with Lucilla, a relationship into which he has put all his patience and devotion, and which may be approaching marriage, is suspended in his realisation that she is "like my sister". In the final moments of the book he has turned to a woman with whom his "literary business" has brought him into correspondence, and who has agreed to let him write to her "with a total openness". **The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan** ends:

On the second of January he wrote to Veronica Steen, 'Thank you for accepting me. Now I'll open to you, my woman, my secret love, my joy . . .'

For Felix Greenspan, writing and sex, if not art and love, have come together.

(But somehow, all the relationships are unsatisfying — figures tend to come and go with no sense that they have a life and individuality independent of their part in the life of Felix Greenspan.)

The book ends in suspense, but looking forward.

For my money, the childhood episodes of the book are the best: although there is some nice wit and humour in the adult episodes too. Perhaps the narrative technique and Mr Abraham's sometimes archaic style suit the world of childhood better. It is difficult to maintain the kind of detachment required to respond to the slightly ingenuous note by the author that the "book is fictional and is not meant to be read as an account of real people or occurrences." In the later stories the autobiographical pressure seems particularly heavy.

In the end Felix maintains his celibacy: it isn't just that he isn't married, but that he has not achieved a relationship of lasting communion. Is it a peculiarly South African phenomenon that so many relationships that look like love turn out to be something else? Felix's black mistress is a client in the end: his spiritual lover may as well be his sister.

Read it. See what you think. □

a child's guide to politics

by Nigel Gray

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I was out walking
the other night
alone in the forest
and I got such a fright
I heard a scuffle
and then a yowl
and I saw a mouse
grabbed by an owl
well my feet took root
like weeds in the ground
I should have said something
but I made no sound
I just stared at the mouse
blood wept from its head
like that runny honey
that slides off your bread
I should have done something
but what could I do
invite a bite from a bloody great owl
well I mean
would you?