“This is a strange land we live in,” Looksmart says to Patricia in Craig Higginson’s novel, *The Dream House*. The small farm in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands that they inhabit — a microcosm of the strange land in which they live — is particularly strange, especially on the night that Patricia and Looksmart reunite.

It is Patricia’s last night on the farm. She has sold the land after decades of breeding ponies there and now, as an old woman, plans to relocate and to spend the remaining years of her life watching the ships in Durban’s bay from the verandah of the family home where her father used to drink his gin and tonic. But on this final misty night, as she attempts to quietly pack up her memories, together with her belongings, Looksmart returns to unsettle everything Patricia thinks she remembers.

Patricia and Looksmart haven’t seen each other for twenty five years or more, not since he completed the private boarding school education that Patricia funded, and, although they have
often thought of each over the years, the reunion is nothing that either would have expected.

Like the mist that is so prevalent in the KZN Midlands, the narrative reveals and hides, in turn, different aspects of their story. The events of the night unfold from the perspective of five characters — Patricia, Richard, Beauty, Bheki, and Looksmart — who, also, each recount past events that gradually reveal the links and entanglements of their lives.

The novel has five parts and it is in this neat and overlapping narrative structure that Higginson’s ability as a playwright shines through. The sections, or ‘acts’, are each rounded off so dramatically and skillfully that I imagined I could hear the stage curtain swish closed; while the authentic and plausible dialogue draws the focus in so tightly that it is as if a spotlight is shining on the characters. Reading The Dream House, I was reminded of Chekhov’s play ‘The Cherry Orchard’. I detected parallels in its depiction of Patricia as a woman reluctantly giving up a family farm in the midst of greater socio-political changes, and of all the characters grappling with their changing roles within society and their relationships with one other.

The dramatic qualities of the text are subtle, however, and serve as support for the interiority that the novel, as a literary form, allows, and which Higginson exploits with his multi-voiced approach. These qualities, together with the poetic imagery and verisimilitude used to describe the surroundings, produce a novel that evokes an intense emotional response and raises questions about the wisdom of exploring the past. Should we ‘let sleeping dogs lie’ or is it better to shoot them, as Patricia does, and bury them deep in the earth? Can a trauma, experienced in the past, ever be resolved in the present?

Much of contemporary South African literature focuses on the traumas of the past and I have noticed a delineation between authors who are inclined to offer a glimmer of hope in their narratives, and those who, rather, present a melancholic dead-end with no way out of the perpetual recycling of trauma. Throughout The Dream House, the threat of violence simmers beneath the surface of the prose and I held my breath as I neared the end: having carefully escalated the tension, would this story of frustrated communication end in trauma and violence, or would there be some sort of resolution. Given the entanglement and intensity of the novel’s themes — for example, of memory, remembering and forgetting, of sex, love, and marriage, of mental health, of birth and death — I was apprehensive that the novel would not sustain its intensity and would end in anticlimax. However, the conclusion, though quiet, is satisfying, and
depicts uncannily the state of transmutation ordinary South Africans are currently navigating in this “strange land we live in”.

*The Dream House* is Craig Higginson’s fourth novel, and is published by Picador Africa (2015). His earlier novels are *The Hill* (2005), *Last Summer* (2010), and *The Landscape Painter* (2011). For more information on the author, please see his profile feature on the KZN Literary Tourism website: www.literarytourism.co.za.

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