

# True horrors of SA suburbia laid bare

**CRY BABY**  
**LAUREN LIEBENBERG**  
**PENGUIN**

**BOOK REVIEWER:**  
**MARGARET**  
**VON KLEMPERER**

LAUREN Liebenberg's new novel starts slowly, offering only hints of dramas to come.

Grace and Michael seem the norm of modern suburban couples, sweeping the tensions in their relationship under the carpet, living in a new and soulless development with their two kids.

Ben, the elder, is well behaved and anxious to please. Sam is a handful, given to pushing boundaries, sometimes to an alarming extent, and prone to bad dreams.

Grace has elected to be a stay-at-home mother, but interaction with the school-gate moms and their petty rivalries and bitchiness is driving her nuts.

It's a familiar story, and you can't help feeling that the whole society needs a good shake.

But as Liebenberg proceeds with her tale, it becomes first atmospheric as Sam's dreams, both sleeping and

waking, are increasingly haunted by the ghostly figure of a little girl and then toxic as the true horrors of life in South African suburbia are laid bare.

Liebenberg draws a picture of societal pressures that are sometimes funny as the yummy mummies compete and take digs at each other, but are also lethal, and show that civilised behaviour is a very thin veneer over the protectiveness and competitiveness of the female in defence of her young. And that secrecy is a corrosive norm in relationships.

The explosion after Sam's behaviour eventually goes too far is frightening and shocking, and then the book takes off.

Once the tragedy is real, and not merely an extension of school-gate sniping, people behave differently and their true colours begin to be revealed.

The reader is left to ponder whether Grace and Michael's little family will survive, but for the first time, you feel that they both deserve to and have a chance to.

*Cry Baby* is not always a comfortable read, but it is a potent one.

• Read an interview with Lauren Liebenberg on tomorrow's Books page.

