



Beyond the Pale

Rian Malan Goes Home

BY MARK GEVISSER

MY TRAITOR'S HEART. By Rian Malan. Atlantic Monthly Press, \$19.95.

Rian Malan's heritage is apartheid's heritage: from the time his Huguenot ancestors arrived in Cape Town 300 years ago and trekked out to the frontier to commence a tribal war that has yet to end, his family has been on Afrikaner Nationalism's front line. His great-uncle, D. F. Malan, was the architect of apartheid, and a relative, General Magnus Malan, was P. W. Botha's Minister of Defense. When the militant township youths chant a roll call of oppressors who will perish, the name "Malan" is always upon it.

"I see them at the township rallies," the young Afrikaner journalist writes at the outset of his project, "thousands upon thousands of them, running to and fro in tight formation. Their feet thunder in unison. Their faces glisten with sweat and excitement. Dust rises. They cradle imaginary AK-47s in their arms, and chant: ... Fuck off, Malan! Fuck off! Fuck off! And then they wheel in formation and thunder away to the far side of some dusty township stadium, leaving me poised on a cusp of history." They are his

muse and his nemesis, these youths. What they inspire is a memoir, partly an anguished confessional and partly a *New Yorker*-style "Reporter at Large" essay, that feels like a David Lynch interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* with footnotes by Lévi-Strauss. It's literate and terrifying.

After we have encountered Kurtz (in the guise of two white South African agronomists who chose the most godforsaken, violent pit of geologically and spiritually eroded Bantustan hell in which to work their ecological magic), the author confesses that the 300-odd pages of physical death and psychic disfigurement we have just read were not at all what he intended to write. He intended to write a history of his family and a testimony to how he, the "Just White Man," had managed to liberate himself from his heritage's soul-destroying and self-destructive grasp. But, he writes, "I'm so deeply enmeshed in half-truths and fictionalizations of myself that I'll never escape until I simply tell the truth. ... I am not sure I'm any of the men I have pretended to be."

Because of his alienation, he is able to analyze the various paradoxes of his country with a dry, satiric edge that cuts to the core of his own self-deception. The

chapters that describe his growing up in Johannesburg's liberal, Westernized northern suburbs, where heads turn northward like so many sunflowers to the great white mother culture, are the book's best: the author remembers JFK's assassination but not Sharpeville, and his first black heroes were James Baldwin and James Brown. As a rebellious teen he started a blues band, "and there we were, Boerboys, wailin' and hollerin' about Negro trouble and sufferin' at garage parties in the segregated white suburbs of John Vorster's South Africa."

But this world is in Africa, or rather, as Malan would have it, on Africa: "The northern suburbs," he says, "were like a glass-bottomed boat, adrift on a violent and mysterious sea. We could peer down into the depths and see strange life-forms—twisted Calvinists, cold-blooded apartheid zealots, dancing Zionists and suffering, inscrutable Africans—but we remained tourists of sorts, warm and safe in our comfortable berths. ... If we stepped overboard, though, anything could happen." He steps overboard, and discovers that it is more mysterious and violent beneath the swell than he ever dreamed.

Malan once fled South Africa to America, he tells us, because he could not resolve the paradox of "loving" black people while at the same time being terrified of them. When, at the height of the 1985 uprisings, he returns from an eight-year exile, he becomes obsessed with overcoming the mortal fear that visits him every time he picks up a black hitchhiker or enters the war zone of a township. He decides to drive around the country looking for "tales of ordinary murder," stories of extreme violence in which he hopes to find paradigms for his country's hatred that might inspire his own demons.

And blood-soaked paradigms he finds: an apolitical black choirboy stomped into the ground by white policemen; a black comrade stomped into the ground by rival township youths. A black man is beaten to death by the host of a summer evening's barbecue while his guests stand round and applaud; white couples are killed in their sleep by the "Hammerman," a Zulu serial murderer whose sanity astounds Malan and whose tribal legacy—a curse at birth—leads the white author to see that there is a volatile world of African spirituality that exists beneath the civilized rituals of settler society.

Once Malan taps into this world, his own writing becomes incandescent. Hip township buppies offer sacrifices to their ancestors to ensure their upward mobility, and family maids, revealed as witch doctors, are considered "quaint" and "colorful" and forced to pose in full regalia with the little white boys whose beds they make. The Just White Man himself is forced to acknowledge a vast territory of African values unchartable by his Western notions of justice and humanity.

We've had this land of impenetrable Otherness drawn for us by countless Wild West movies and 16th century colonial

tracts. But Malan reformulates it weirdly, powerfully, within the context of a modern revolution. A mob of miners, for example, disrupts the agenda of their trade union—and Western socialist notions of struggle—by taking on the might of the mining industry and the South African police with clubs and knives, believing that a traditional ointment rubbed into open cuts on their bodies would turn bullets into water.

Malan's search eventually leads him to Creina and Neil Alcock, the peaceful white agronomists who function as the narrative's heart, as potty as Kurtz, but at least for the right reasons. In the Alcocks Malan ultimately finds a model "two whites who loved Africa," whose "love had carried them deeper into Africa than any other whites" and who thought their "love would protect them there." Neil, however, is murdered by a Zulu imp when he tries to resolve the pointless tribal wars that have rent the district for centuries, and his widow, betrayed by everyone including the sickly little black boy she nursed back to health and adopted, finally succumbs to the violence of the world around her and becomes part of it.

Their way, Malan tells us, is the only one, for they step off the glass-bottomed boat into the unknown. But the world they inhabit, as described in 60 mesmerizing, awful pages at the end of the book, is biblical in its proportions of horror, heartlessness, and brutality, and the wilderness seems, ultimately, to have conquered the prophets. The Alcocks, like Rian Malan's ancestor who crossed the frontier, have "extinguished the light of Enlightenment because they found themselves in a place of darkness, where loving made for weak and doubtful men." His ancestor, Dawid Malan, was banished from the civilized confines of the Cape Colony because he was enlightened enough to have married one of his slave girls. When he crossed the frontier—the Great Fish River—into Africa, however, he was transformed into a man as brutal as his environment. "I didn't have to dig in the archives for Dawid Malan," his descendant concludes. "I looked in the mirror and there he was. His frontier had moved inside my head, and travelled with me wherever I went. I thought of him whenever I crossed the border into the riot-torn townships, and my guts started gnarling with dread."

It would be easy to hate and disregard this book, for it uses a left-wing perspective to recast Africa as savage and it verges on blaming the continent for the white man's sins rather than vice versa. It would be easy to read Malan as a settler boy who devoted his life, as an anti-apartheid journalist, to disproving the Mau Mau nightmares upon which his birthright of hate is founded, and who then woke up to find out they were true. But, in writing this book, Malan doesn't take the easy route, for he struggles with his beasts in a way that makes an honest and complicated contribution to a centuries-old discourse on colonialism. ■