THE SOUTH AFRICAN NOVEL TODAY
2.7.2017

BY DEREK ATTRIDGE

Who is South Africa’s leading English novelist? Who has succeeded Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee—still with us, but hardly a South African novelist any longer? Since the arrival of democracy in 1994, there has been a welcome broadening of subject matter, but it could be argued that in the past decade there has been a loss of direction. Two new studies of recent South African fiction, Andrew van der Vlies’s Present Imperfect and Leon de Kock’s Losing the Plot, as their titles suggest, diagnose an impasse that reflects a widely experienced malaise.1 “This study,” states de Kock at the outset, “proceeds from the premise that an initial wave of optimism, evident in the early phase of upbeat transitional ferment, was followed by a gradual and deepening sense of ‘plot loss’ among South African writers and intellectuals of all stripes.”2 Van der Vlies takes as his watchword “disappointment,” the sense that many of the promises of 1994 remain unfulfilled, and argues that recent fiction reflects this sense of a stalled revolution in many different ways.

Zoë Wicomb’s David’s Story and Zakes Mda’s The Heart of Redness, both first published in 2000, took an impressively long view of the country’s history; Ivan Vladislavić’s The Restless Supermarket (2001) gave a bravura account of the difficult road out of apartheid.3 More recently, Marlene van Niekerk and Etienne van Heerden have published important large-scale fictional works in Afrikaans that engage powerfully with the social and political condition of the country.4 But the ambitious state-of-the-nation novel in English seems to have disappeared along with the early hopes of the new nation.

Imraan Coovadia’s Tales of the Metric System sets its sights on being just such a novel. Coovadia’s earlier novels tracked the lives of wayward individuals, often members of the South African Indian community, registering amusement at the characters’ foibles and relish in their spoken idiom as they cope with purposes mistook and plans gone astray. This novel has very different ambitions. Each of its 10 sections presents a day in the history of the country from 1970 to 2010, many of them reflecting significant events or political developments, such as the violence in the townships during the transition to democracy, the celebration of the “Rainbow Nation” at the rugby World Cup, and the disastrous AIDS policy of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency (strongly opposed by Coovadia’s activist father). The novel has an ambitious geographic range: scenes are set in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria, and London.5

The structure works well as a way of moving through historical time. Although each section is a self-contained vignette of South African life, characters appear and reappear throughout the sequence. The failings of both the old and the new dispensations are put on display, with glimmers of redeeming humanity now and then to counteract the prevalence of the calculating mindset hinted at by the title.

IMRAAN COOVADIA’S AMBITIOUS NEW NOVEL SETS ITS SIGHTS ON ADDRESSING THE STATE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATION.

However, the attempt to create imaginative fiction that is at the same time an engagement with history results in a confusing mishmash of the two kinds of writing. Of the many ways to tell a story on this large canvas, Coovadia chooses to mix historical characters presented under their real names, fictional characters based on real individuals, and completely imaginary characters. The result can be uncomfortable. Take the character of Neil Hunter, who features in the first episode and is central to the last. He is a thinly disguised version of a real individual, and the shocking event that provides the novel’s conclusion is based on an actual occurrence. Shortly before midnight on January 8, 1978, Rick Turner, a 36-year-old academic, was shot, presumably by an agent of the state, through the front window of his Durban house. Turner was a highly effective activist in the struggle against apartheid, mobilizing white opposition just as his friend Steve Biko—murdered in
Tales of the Metric System stands on its own as a readable, intricately plotted, strongly felt engagement with the fluctuations of a turbulent history, but we will have to wait a little longer for the novel that rises fully to the challenge of contemporary South Africa


De Kock, Losing the Plot, p. 3.

Zoë Wicomb, David’s Story (The Feminist Press, 2002); Zakes Mda, The Heart of Redness (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002); Ivan Vladislavić, The Restless Supermarket (David Philip, 2001).
See, for example, Marlene van Niekerk, Agaat (Tin House Books, 2010), and Etienne van Heerden, 30 Nights in Amsterdam (Penguin, 2011), both translated from the Afrikaans by Michiel Heyns. 

Oddly, however, Johannesburg appears to have acquired Table Mountain.

See Billy Kenniston, Choosing to Be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner (Jacana, 2014).

See My Father, Rick Turner, directed and produced by Jann Turner.

Other identifiable characters include Uncle Ashok and Farhad, who are based on Schabir Shaik, Jacob Zuma’s disgraced capitalist crony, and ANC stalwart Essop Pahad, implicated in corrupt arms dealing.

Coovadia’s continuing resentment at Coetzee’s fame is perhaps evident in a little detail in Tales: Hunter’s suspected killer is said to have “emigrated to Adelaide, Australia.”