

Book Review from The Warwick Review, March 2010

Bryony Rheam, *This September Sun* (amaBooks, 2009) ISBN: 978-0-7974-3744-9, 362 pp,

The house of Zimbabwean letters is haunted by a ghost that few of its writers have been able to exorcise. Settler colonialism – in particular the culture of minority racial rule, with all it entailed in terms of fiercely polarised ideas of nation, race and class – was deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life for all Rhodesians. So deeply embedded, in fact, that for a generation of writers after independence, black as well as white, Zimbabwe seemed a foreign land. Fixated on the colonial past, these writers appeared unable to conceive a liberated present: their imaginative world was haunted by the spectre of Rhodesia.

With this ambitious first novel, *This September Sun*, Bryony Rheam joins the ranks of a small but growing number of writers who seem intent on laying this ghost to rest. But that is not to say that *This September Sun* does not also dwell on the past. To the contrary. In its forensically detailed, and at times unapologetically wistful, exploration of Bulawayo's suburban white society from the 1940s to the present day, Rheam's novel at first glance appears exemplary of this sepia-tinted trend. What sets this book apart from others in this vein, however, is its focus on two characters whose intertwined stories illuminate an under-represented milieu of both colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwean society.

These two characters are Evie Saunders, an English migrant who arrived in Rhodesia in 1947, and her granddaughter Ellie, born in Bulawayo in 1974. The novel is narrated by Ellie and begins with her recollecting the circumstances of her sixth birthday, the day Zimbabwe gained independence:

On the 18th of April 1980, my grandfather burnt the British flag ... Many white people had already decided to leave by the time the Rhodesian flag was lowered and the new Zimbabwean one hoisted. Grandad said we were in for trouble; this was just the beginning.(1)

This passage is noteworthy not so much for the tragicomic portrait of the inebriated grandfather and his moribund 'Rhodies never die' attitude, but because it also marks the day that Ellie's grandmother left this man in search of her own freedom. Ellie interprets a scar Evie receives from the flag-burning ceremony as a portent:

It looked like the shape of Zimbabwe etched on her arm. I think Gran was always a little proud of the mark, a symbol of the price she paid for freedom. Many years later, the man who murdered my grandmother would remember that mark as the last thing he saw as she raised her arms against him before he brought the butt of his gun down on her head.(2)

This remark and the subsequent narrative focus on Evie's 'independence' offers a completely novel – and indeed controversial – way of allegorising the history of post-colonial Zimbabwe. Rheam risks serious censure in choosing to compose such a symbolic narrative from the perspective of its historically privileged, yet increasingly embattled, white suburban population. Judged against the quality of what follows it is, to my mind at any rate, a justified gambit.

With a nod, perhaps, to the renowned South African writer J.M. Coetzee, Rheam creates a memoirist in her own image. Though not as felicitous or compact as Coetzee's 'memoirs', through this writerly conceit Rheam explores to compelling effect the secretive and self-absorbed world of a minority culture she was born into yet is unsure if she wants to belong.

The book is divided into three parts. Ellie's attempt to banish family ghosts through the act of writing – the framing 'now' of the book – is the motivation for recording the memories of her formative years in the first part of the book. This section deals with events and themes fairly typical of the bildungsroman genre: innocence, in time honoured fashion, cedes painfully to experience. The emotional maelstrom of youth – in particular of coming to terms with being, In Coetzee's famous phrase, 'no longer European, not yet African' – is affectingly conveyed.

There is a marked change in tone and pace in the second and third parts of the novel, corresponding to Ellie's discovery of different batches of her murdered grandmother's letters. The discoveries enable Ellie to cut through the veils of secrecy that shrouded her childhood. Transcribing the letters, Ellie reassembles her grandmother's life story – quite self-consciously – as a hybrid narrative: part romance, part mystery. Most importantly, we learn of an affair started in the 1940s which had a profound, albeit hidden, impact on family life for the next half a century.

In uncovering the secret life of her grandmother in this way, Ellie also embarks on a journey which leads to the gradual discovery of her own, complex, post-colonial identity. Unlike the romantic mystery she wants to write, however, Ellie finds that the uncomfortable truths she discovers deny resolution to this deeper mystery: '*I stop writing. Is it all too personal, too subjective, too me?*' (89) Yet by continuing to write – by confronting and so coming to terms with the past – Ellie is able finally to envisage returning to Africa. "See Zimbabwe for what it is," her Zimbabwean suitor Tony implores, "not as some failed annex of 1950s Britain. People *carry on living* ... Write a different story, Ellie." His voice was suddenly soft, the anger subsiding. "A different ending, at least." (358)

And so the novel does end with a resolution, and in both senses of the word: 'I don't want to have a Rhodesian flag up in my living room and I don't want to write the memoirs of my African childhood. I don't want to live in the past.' (359) To no longer be haunted by the past – to live fully in the present – it seems Ellie must first confront and demystify it. While other reviewers will no doubt take issue with her exclusive focus on white Zimbabwean society in *September Sun*, I would argue that by presenting us with characters from this minority with whom we can empathise as well as criticise, Bryony Rheam takes a bold but necessary step toward exorcising the ghost of Rhodesia from the house of Zimbabwean letters.

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