Garden of the Plagues by Russel Brownlee (Human & Rousseau)

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It is with a certain trepidation that one approaches yet another novel about the early days at the Cape. We know, by now, the likely ingredients: the terrible weather, the filthy and disease ridden ships, the benighted little colony at the foot of Table Mountain, the ruthless exploitation of the Dutch East India Company, the extreme brutality of daily life, the appalling treatment of the indigenous population; in general, the travesty of civilisation that was being perpetrated upon this soil. It is no reflection on the quality of the novels that have made these conditions their subject to say that they have been relentlessly grim.

What a delight it is, then, to come across a novel that, without prettifying the brutal face of colonial expansion, can yet give us a sense of what it was that did, after all, make the seventeenth century a golden age, however compromised by the conditions of its own prosperity. And what a pleasure to meet a cast of characters that, though containing more unredeemed scoundrels than you could shake a stick at, yet seem, in all their petty vulnerabilities, quite human, even humane.

Taking off from the proposition that the expansion of scientific knowledge, as much as the extension of trade and Christianity, was an inextricable part of colonial endeavour, the novel focuses on a group of men driven at least partly by the disinterested pursuit of scientific knowledge. It soon becomes evident, however, that the rage to name and to classify, is itself a form of colonialism, of imposing system and order on a creation inimical to such categorisation.

The novel's ruling metaphor looms on the first page: in the days of Simon van der Stel, a whale appears in Table Bay, dark, huge, mysterious: "There it lay, its dark bulk floating jut off the shore, watching. The people watched it back." After a few days it washes ashore. It is cut up and packaged, and the colonists believe that they have now somehow 'got' the whale; as the narrator wryly sums up their smug certainty: "In the end we have the whole of it there in our barrels. We have the sum of this whale, and there is nothing at all that can be said to be missing." But all they have are a few barrels of whale meat: that which made the whale a mysterious creature has escaped their containers.

If science is the ultimate putter of whales into barrels, it also has its benevolent aspect: a group of Jesuit priests, on their way to Siam, are welcomed by Van der Stel because of their scientific interest in the Cape, in spite of the Dutch distrust of Catholicism; and the priests themselves, as depicted here, are humane, even humanist.

The novel's main character, Adam Wijk, once a physician, is a gardener, intent upon helping Van der Stel construct a *hortus Africanus*, collecting and classifying the rich variety of indigenous vegetation.

When a ship comes ashore of which four of the passenger have succumbed to a mysterious disease, the gardener is instructed to watch over the sole survivor, a young woman apparently in a coma. The little settlement fears that she may have the Plague; the doctor, who survived the Great Plague of London, is convinced that she does not. But who and what is she, and why has she come to the Cape?

Underlying this enquiry is Wijk's life-long interest in the Plague: what causes it? "What is the name of the thing that travels between one person and another carrying illness?" So

here, too, is a problem of classification, of making sense of something that would seem to defy reason. When he is given a microscope by one of the Jesuits, Wijk is enthralled by the discovery of whole universes of ‘animalcules’: “One wonders if they know, these creatures, of the being who watches them – or is he merely one more fertile universe for them to colonise with their blindly teeming lives?”
So, ingeniously, the search for knowledge is brought into relation with the theme of colonial expansion: we seek to extend the boundaries of knowledge, but what we discover is that we are ourselves being colonised by creatures of whom we have hitherto been unaware.
So, the novel asks, are we better off for the ability to know by naming and classification? Certainly, when we are trying to deal with a plague: “Those who have words for how things work must always win.” But, having named everything, we find that we have lost our sense of the unknowable: “We have abstracted ourselves from the world of the nameless gargantuan and the holy terrors, and now we yearn to find a way back in.”
The novel is humane enough to grant some of its characters liberation from their own categories. The young school master, fleeing, like so many of these colonist, a guilty secret, is in terms of our modern categories, homosexual, “a man who has been tagged and labelled”; but he marries the sister of the young man he is in love with and finds that by redefining what they are both looking for in marriage, they may yet live happily ever after.
As this last example will show, the novel is lenient about human potential. It is even possible that it is overly optimistic about human adaptability: but it obtrudes its vision upon us so persuasively that we are left enchanted rather than critical.
The novel’s style is not the least of its delights; it has a wry humour about it, a clipped utterance that is laconic and matter-of-fact and can yet rise to passages of lyricism, doing justice to both the scientific state of mind and the “something” that escapes its categories.
For a first novel, *Garden of the Plagues* is astonishingly sophisticated and assured; by any standards, it is a delight. I think South African literature has gained a major new talent.