

Night Jasmine Man by David Lambkin (Viking Penguin)

2 March 2003

David Lambkin has, in his latest book, adopted the pattern of the Hero's Quest. Of this pattern, Christopher Vogler, in his book *The Writer's Journey*, says that "all storytelling, whether consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth and that all stories . . . can be understood in terms of the Hero's Journey: the 'monomyth'". According to him, all narratives draw on a set of archetypes present to the collective unconscious, creating infinite variations on a single basic pattern, that of the hero's quest. Thus, say, *The Lord of the Rings*, owes its tremendous appeal to its powerful re-enactment of an archetypal quest.

The archetypal quest here is the search of the protagonist Richard Turnbull for his daughter who has been reported missing, probably murdered, in East Africa. Leaving behind his mad wife incarcerated in House Persephone, he follows various leads to the island of Peponi, which we, we are told, means Paradise in Swahili, and which is reached via Lethe Channel (readers are advised to keep a classical dictionary handy). Peponi is ruled by the mysterious Sultan, master over thousands, slave to passions and perversions without name or number. Near Peponi is the smaller island of Sanga, on which there is a labyrinth complete, apparently, with a bull to whom virgins (or at any rate nubile young women) are regularly sacrificed.

Turnbull, who like Orpheus before him, is a musician, settles in this paradise-hell, and proceeds to compose a Threnody for the annual music festival, one of the events sponsored by the generous Sultan. With the help of some of the inhabitants and in spite of the hindrance of several others, Turnbull slowly pieces together the circumstances of his daughter's disappearance, ultimately to fulfil his quest in a manner which it would be unkind to reveal here.

The story crawls and slithers with archetypes and their attendants -- the mentor, the guardian, the shapeshifter, the femme fatale, the trickster, and of course The Shadow, the dark alter ego, in the figure of the Sultan who looks so much like Turnbull that they are taken for brothers. The Sultan, we are told, is "very miserable in spring, as if he'd lost a queen." And so forth: the mythic parallels are everywhere, not very coherently deployed. The idea seems to be that Turnbull, having Turned the Bull like Theseus before him, is driven to confront his own darker self in the diabolical Sultan, and is then fit to take his place on Peponi, which, under the rule of the ailing Sultan, had turned into a Waste Land complete with a plague epidemic (TS Eliot is acknowledged in passing). Turnbull, having found his daughter, loses her again (as Orpheus does Eurydice) and gains the most alluring of the femmes fatales, but only for half the year, since she has to spend the other half the in the Northern hemisphere (Turnbull having then at this stage presumably become the ruler of the Underworld to whom Persephone belongs only in the Northern winter).

It's all fairly good fun, if rather gory and mucous at times: Indiana Jones Meets Emmanuelle, in a Temple of Doom straight from Pasolini. The women are, as the saying goes, very in your face with their sexual favours. There is a female orgasm that should

make it into the annals of human sexuality: "Her thighs began to quiver and suddenly my mouth was filled with a warm spurting ejaculate, salty and sweet as coconut milk. Her stomach muscles contracted in long ripples. She screamed softly again and again. Her juices ran down my chin. I swallowed and licked her until the spurting subsided."

There is an orgy featuring more body parts and bodily fluids than even the most hardened pagan would know what to do with (although the Sultan manages just fine). There is a complete description of what every character is wearing on each appearance and re-appearance. There is even a bit of time travel, the main purpose of which seems to be to allow Turnbull to indulge a decidedly old-fashioned taste in lingerie.

So why, with all this to keep him enthralled, does the reader sigh in despair at being told, on p 325, "There's not much left to tell," when it's all too obvious that there are another sixty pages to go? It may be to do with Lambkin's determination that his Hero is Deep. What could have been a good yarn is spoiled by some portentous philosophising and pretentious disquisitions on large Topics ("It came to me in a twinkling: to know the underlying substrate, the numinous, the Absolute -- to touch the face of the Universe -- I need to understand the godliness that is already inside me."). By the same token, some decidedly raunchy sex scenes are not so much dignified as deflated by heavily self-conscious spiritualising ("I had an uncomfortable suspicion that I could grow to love Gretchen in the way that I loved great music and the sea and sunlight and being alone.") The insistence that a good lay is a form of oneness with the Universe ("I'd kissed the pith of her, our passion neverending, the stars drowning inside us both") is difficult to reconcile with some of the manifestations of the pith here displayed: "I kissed the inside of her thigh, the taut tendon that drew there, the softest skin, softer than children's kisses. She smelt of sweet peppers and Magie Noire. 'My God,' she said. 'Never, never, never, never'."

Vogler says of the Hero's Journey that "it's easy to generate thoughtless clichés and stereotypes from this matrix." If Lambkin's archetypes don't altogether turn into stereotypes, there is still something mechanical about the way in which he constructs his Hero's Journey. The whole mythological underpinning comes across as just so much window-dressing, having very little to do, functionally speaking. All in all, Indiana Jones was more fun, and the Hobbits more sexy.