

*No Man's Land* by Carel van der Merwe (Umuzi) R130

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A month or so ago one might have questioned the relevance of yet another novel on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but recent developments seem to suggest that there are still many ghosts unladen, still many tales to be told.

Be that as it may, this novel takes as its subject a thirty-something Afrikaner, Paul du Toit, who finds himself appearing before the TRC to account for his actions as Special Services operative and student spy for Military Intelligence.

It is in the latter capacity, while studying at UCT, that he infiltrates the End Conscription Campaign, and participates in a plot to plant a bomb in one of their meeting places. He is assured by his superiors that it is merely an intimidation tactic, that nobody will be killed, but in the event the bomb goes off early, and two ECC members are killed – amongst them André, a friend of Paul's and, as it happens, a rival for the affections of Louise, now Paul's wife.

When Paul appears before the TRC, he loses his job in a financial services company, and Louise walks out on him. The no man's land of the title refers to his situation, abandoned by his erstwhile handlers and exposed to public scorn: "he had crossed a border, the border between safe anonymity and public notoriety, and now he was in no man's land." But on a wider reading, the no man's land is South Africa, as it appears to the newly disempowered white Afrikaner: "It is the new South Africa and he is an unwelcome reminder of the past, a past most whites want to forget or ignore. ... His crimes had been for the nation, he had argued at the hearing. But that nation is in denial."

Searching for Louise, Paul goes off to London, where he mixes with the South African expatriates hoping for news of her whereabouts. The novel convincingly renders the somewhat bleak squalor of life for many of the ex-pats in London: "And everywhere he listens to the same conversations, laments about the miserable weather, the cost of living in London, the longing for home, doubts about the future of South Africa."

The young people he shares a house with, interested mainly in getting drunk, getting high and getting laid, are already of another generation to his. Here, too, Paul is in a no man's land: "They were not yet born when Soweto erupted, were at primary school when the Border War ended, in high school at the time of the 1994 election."

My synopsis thus far may suggest that this novel is mainly a white whinge about lost privileges. But it is considerably subtler than that: through Paul du Toit, van der Merwe examines the complicity of white South Africa in the crimes of the past, and suggests that there is very little truth and no reconciliation to be expected. After meeting the mother of one of the victims of the botched bombing, Paul realises that there is no reparation, no expiation for such a crime: "And suddenly he knows, and the realisation is overwhelming, that he cannot expect, does not deserve, anything. ... He has been granted amnesty, and for that he should be grateful, but absolution he does not deserve, nor will he get it".

One does not expect a novel to encompass all points of view, and the point of view here is firmly that of a particular generation of white South African. Yet van der Merwe does transcend these self-imposed limits by enacting, through Paul du Toit, a process of discovery, a recognition that what he saw as legitimate self-defence was blinkered self-

interest, blinding him to the claims of others he shares a country with. And if the novel is acerbic about “our president , who believes in AIDS fairytales he finds on the Internet”, it is no less scathing about the complacent relics of the old order, gathering in pious pomp for the funeral of Paul’s politician father: “the old Pretoria elite: former senior civil servants, politicians, academics, businessmen, all securely in retirement now, beneficiaries of the high tide of Afrikanerdom. And their upright wives ...”

*No Man’s Land* is an indictment of one generation by another: “ his generation,” Paul reflects, “the generation that had listened and believed, had been cut adrift and left to atone for the sins of their fathers.”

Of course, one may want to ask whether young white South Africans were really so helplessly committed to the lies of their elders: how come André and his fellow ‘subversives’ in the ECC had listened but not believed? Also, Paul seems to feel remorse only about the botched bombing: was the real crime not the betrayal of the fellow-students who trusted him? But this is a novel, not a discussion paper, and it is to its credit that it generates more questions than it attempts to answer.

*No Man’s Land* is being published simultaneously in English and Afrikaans. The English version reads fluently and comfortably, in un-flashy, workmanlike prose. The descriptions of London in particular are concrete and vivid, the relationships believable and unsentimental. All in all, this is an engrossing and thoughtful novel, albeit not an optimistic one.