

*Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* by Ivan Vladislavić (Umuzi) R125

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It is easier to say what this book is not than what it is.

It is not a novel.

It is not an essay, nor even a collection of essays.

It is not a lament for a lost Johannesburg nor a blueprint for a New Johannesburg.

It is certainly not a Guide to Johannesburg.

It is not an autobiography, although that is what it is closest to being. Vladislavić has called it “a selective self-portrait”, and by the time you get to the end of the 138 short sections (incidents, instances, perceptions, portraits, observations, recollections) that make up the book, you know about his father, his brother, his partner and (some of) the girl friends who preceded her. You know about (quite a few of) the places he has stayed in, about his working habits, about his friends and his way of spending time with them, you know about (some of) the books he’s read, about (many of) the walks he’s taken, and with whom. In short, you end up thinking you know the man.

But as anyone who has read Vladislavić’s earlier work will know, for him character and setting are inextricably bound; it’s a theme he has explored in his fiction from at least as early as *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), revisited in *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and stated most fully in the recent *The Exploded View* (2004), which can be seen as a kind of fictional companion piece to *Portrait with Keys*. If, in these works, characters construct and define setting, they are no less constructed and defined by it; and in his latest work the “self-portrait” seems almost incidental to the portrait of a city that emerges.

Many of these sketches show us people striving to adapt the city to their purposes, and in the process impinging on the purposes of others; the householder who has an Ndebele mural painted on his wall thereby changes the whole neighbourhood, as does, less decoratively, Vladislavić’s neighbour, Eddie, who paints his own hideous mural on his wall. By the same token, the householders who come after and efface the efforts of their predecessors, though “within their rights”, thereby inflict their taste on the community. Not, we would say, much community spirit there, but Vladislavić doesn’t say so: another thing the book is not is moralistic. He does not try persuade or convince us of an intellectual or moral position; it would be easy, even, to conclude that he has not really thought about the vignettes that he presents, is just emptying his notebook into our lap. But that is only because the thinking has been done so inconspicuously: Vladislavić doesn’t treat us to the spectacle of his furrowed brow as he strains at the significance of his observations. He places them as if to speak for themselves, and not the least of the delights of this collection is to establish for oneself the connections that are everywhere in these apparently random pieces.

Vladislavić has smoothed our way by providing what he calls “Itineraries”, “thematic pathways through the book”, in which sections are grouped around a template that can be applied to make the material cohere – a variety, then of “keys” to possible significances rather than a single meaning.

Interestingly, there is no separate itinerary for the Keys the title draws our attention to.

This may be because they are everywhere. Most literally, they figure as talismans against

our constant sense of insecurity: “a nation of turnkeys” says Vladislavić, in the section from which the collection most obviously derives its name, when a Swedish journalist asks if she can take a photograph of his bunch of keys: “In Sweden, only a janitor would need this.”

Keys, in the teasing wordplay of the book, are the keys to our existence: giving us access to what we regard as our own (see “Self storage”, another play of words leading to a richly interconnected set of observations), attempting to lock out of our lives those people who would make what is ours theirs: “In Joburg now,” says one of Vladislavić’s friends, “the hunter-gatherer is in the ascendancy”, and all the embattled householder can do is devise ever more elaborate means of securing his possession against these predations. But, as the book’s opening sentence observes, “When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive”: in our quest for security, we store ourselves in containers that we more and more suspect contain us without securing us.

This “portrait” dramatises one’s man’s battle to possess his space as he is possessed by it, rather than flee to the phonily prefabricated space of some Villa Toscana. “I live in a city that resists the imagination,” he says, but the whole of this book gives him the lie: his imagination is ceaselessly active as he confronts this strange human conglomeration. Standing outside the Plaza Pawn Warehouse in Primrose, observing the “Saturday-morning bustle, the East Rand detail”, he feels “I should feel utterly out of place, but instead I feel that I belong here. I am given shape.”

This rich collection offers us ultimately a reflection on what it is to live in a communal space, how we are “given shape” by our environment and give shape to it. It will not necessarily make you want to move to Joburg, or persuade you to stay there; but it will help you to see anew whatever space you store yourself in and look afresh at your bunch of keys.