

Rainbow's End: A Memoir of Childhood, War & an African Farm by Lauren St John
(Hamish Hamilton) R180

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Writing a memoir is a tricky business: stick closely to the facts, and the story seems humdrum; rearrange them for effect, and it seems phoney.

Lauren St John has managed to steer a course between the two opposed dangers of tedium and sensationalism by telling an engrossing story in an altogether engaging way. Her style, though not flashy, is taut and energetic, and her eye for detail is unerring. The facts, too, are riveting. The African Farm of the subtitle is in Zimbabwe – or rather, was in Rhodesia, since most of the story is set in the seventies, at the time of the Bush War or Chimurenga. St John's father (we gather that his surname was Knoetze, a name much abhorred and eventually abandoned by his wife and daughters), first went to Rhodesia from South Africa as a volunteer in the Rhodesian Army, fell in love with the country, and could never leave it afterwards. "Mom" was the offspring of a long line of distinguished Rhodesians; as passionately as her husband loved Rhodesia, she wanted to travel to distant destinations.

Rainbow's End was, amongst other things, a game farm, a kind of paradise on the Umfuli River near the "no-horse town" of Hartley. The family came to live on the farm because several of the previous occupants were murdered by "terrorists", as they are called in this part of the narrative, which is seen largely from the point of view of the young Lauren. This technique is at first disconcerting, because we are made to share the naïve perspective of a child who is, as she sees much later, "a product of my environment, yes, but still a racist". Thus she can give us a list of "Accepted Facts about Africans" that includes such choice items as "If you spoiled them, they got cheeky", "They were good at singing and dancing" and "They had very virtuous babies". As she sums it up, "I learned very quickly that the power we had over animals and Africans in our patch of Africa was absolute."

As for the terrorists, "I identify terrorists mainly by their hair." She can mention dead-pan that they were called "'terrs' or 'gooks' or 'floppies', a reference to their floppiness after being shot.' And yet, she solemnly tells us, "I fancied us liberals because Mom had always said we were and I'd read *Roots* and cried ..."

Rainbow's End is amongst other things a chronicle of how Lauren comes to lose her childish certainties, not only about Africans and terrorists, but about her whole apparently secure little world.

Paradoxically, her happiest time is the war: for all its terrors, it is full of excitement and camaraderie, and more importantly, it hides other, lesser problems, like, for instance, the rifts in a marriage. The child accepts without question that her mother should go overseas at every opportunity, given that her father spends at least half his time in the army: "My mother went travelling, my father went to war and I went to boarding school. It was the natural order of things."

This natural order, indeed, has something exhilarating about it; as she laconically but unsarcastically comments, "For us, ... death was the only downside of war."

The war enables Lauren, like so many of her fellow white Rhodesians, to sustain a dream: a dream of racial superiority, of high moral purpose, of familial security. It is only

after the war that she comes to realise that "we'd been sold a dream that was especially seductive because it came with a whole lifestyle."

The lifestyle, it must be said, does not seem enviable in all respects. The petty gossip of the Hartley Club, its beery braais and adulterous intrigues, is *White Mischief* at its sleaziest; but it is part of the point that the war keeps the child from recognising these things for what they are, or from realising how precarious her parents' marriage is, and thus her own security.

But if the passing of such a lifestyle is not to be mourned, the loss of so much that went with it is. St John does not labour the point, but underlying the sadness of the closing sections is the knowledge that Zimbabwe emerged from white domination only to be plundered and devastated by its self-styled liberator and his henchmen: "Once more we were united in perhaps the only language Zimbabweans knew how to be united in: the language of grief."

My description so far may make the book seem overly tendentious and hand-wringing. It is in fact in the first place a vivid, honest, loving evocation of a landscape, its inhabitants and especially its animals, told with what seems like effortless total recall. The smallest scene comes alive in all its scents, sensations and smells, as in the description of the farm store where the children go to buy Chicken Flings and Corn Curls: "When the storekeeper passed them to us, his hands were always rough and his skin was always cool, and his shop had the fragrance of Omo washing powder and kapenta and mielie-meal."

As St John describes it, we can believe that Rainbow's End must have seemed like paradise: she makes us share her joy in its abundance and her grief at its loss.