

Red Dust by Gillian Slovo (Virago, R129.95)

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Returning to the country of her birth for her latest novel, Gillian Slovo uses as protagonist one Sarah Barcant, small-town-girl-made-good as New York prosecutor, summoned back to Smitsrivier by her mentor Ben Hoffman, tireless but now dying human rights lawyer, to help him unravel the truth behind an amnesty application before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Sarah, consciously out of place in shabby little Smitsrivier, her fashionable shoes impeding her progress through its dusty streets, is a useful vehicle for Slovo's own half-outsider's view of a country she is no longer familiar with. The other characters offer a representative cross section of the South African racial mix: the small town hotel keeper, the black school principal, the policemen and their families, the activist-turned-MP. If these characters never altogether transcend their representative function, they are still on the whole adequate to the demands placed upon them by the plot: even the slightly spurious ad hoc attraction between Sarah and the glamorous ex-activist Alex Mpondo serves well enough to keep a complicated narrative primed. Their sexual intercourse, when it eventually occurs, is not so much a matter of uncontrollable passion as polite compliance with narrative convention.

The novel is briskly plotted around the death of an anti-apartheid activist, one Steve Sizela. The question that occupies all the main characters is how and when he died and under what circumstances : was he betrayed by the confession of his best friend Alex Mpondo? Did he himself betray Mpondo? Was he a hero, a fool, or a stool pigeon?

The twists and turns of the plot threaten to get out of hand, as layer upon layer of deception is uncovered, and it is with something like relief that the reader discovers that the confusion is deliberate, the point of it being that not even, or perhaps especially not, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can discover the nature of the truth, or ensure reconciliation. The fabric of truth, it is shown, may be indistinguishable from the tangled web of deceit. The ending of the novel in particular is something of a tour de force of multiple perspectives demonstrating the extremely provisional nature of truth.

If the plotting is elaborate, the style is unambitious. Slovo gets on with the business of telling the story without wasting too much time and effort on elegance of expression or balanced syntax.. Although the erratic punctuation, unemphatic language and over-extended sentences have a kind of rough appeal, they do weary the ear after a while, and at times seem frankly under-edited: “On Main Street, a dog-owner shouted an instruction at his schnauzer to leave off barking at a terrified street sweeper, while a kombi took off in a cloud of dust and a drunk tottered crookedly off the pavement, oblivious to the furious burst of car horns.” Syntax aside, what is a street sweeper doing in a dirt road?

At times the flatness seems merely clumsy – as in the book’s opening sentence, where the heroine’s shoes seem to assume a life and will of their own: ‘Sarah glanced down, watching as her black suede ankle boots clipped up the subway chairs.’ Indeed, Slovo's characters seem to have a tendency to become detached from their own body parts: “Pieter stopped and waited while Kobus’s huge flat feet propelled him forward..”

The strengths of the book, then, are in its situations and interactions, its juggling of a variety of perspectives, its attempts to render intelligible if not excusable what it is all too easy to categorise and dismiss as simple evil. The occasion of the book’s plot is an application for amnesty, and in a sense Slovo herself reviews the case of Dirk Hendricks and Pieter Muller: security branch operatives, torturers, murderers, racists – or merely misguided good citizens of a country perceived to be under threat? Good husbands, loving fathers, one a breeder of bantams: the banality of evil or a rediscovery of the ordinary?

It is an old question, one that Randall Jarrell explored in “Eighth Air Force,” describing a group of soldiers in their barracks : “O murderers! Still, this is how it’s done:/ This is a war.” Jarrell ended his poem by stating, like Pontius Pilate, “I find no fault in this just man,” turning the soldier-murderer into a Christ figure. Slovo does not go nearly as far, but does try, one suspects somewhat against the grain, to imbue Hendricks and Muller with some humanity: “No matter how hard he tried to avoid doing so, he always ended up thinking about the children. He would think of Jannie in a foreign country starting school without a father to guide him, or diving for his first rugby try without Dirk there to clap him on the back afterwards. Or else he’d think of his sweet Elsie. Who was going to throw her high in the air until she squealed in delight?”

An ironical reflection of the sentimentality of a killer drooling over his children, or itself a sentimentalisation of the kind of attitude that was perfectly compatible with murder? It is to Slovo's credit that she should, in the spirit of the TRC, try to understand the fellow humanity of a hated adversary, without shirking the price paid by others for the cosy domesticity of the then-dominant group, as witness for instance the dignified grief of the parents of the murdered Steve Sizela.

That there are many who would be less disposed to empathise with the Dirks and the Pieters of Vlakplaas, does not militate against Slovo's right as author to explore the issue. If one is still left slightly uncomfortable at the fictional amnesty extended, however provisionally, to men whose real-life prototypes are still too much with us, that may be a failure on one's own part to take the point that to a large extent Apartheid's thugs were the (admittedly more than willing) functionaries and eventually the scapegoats of a racist society.