

*The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* by Etienne van Heerden (Sceptre)

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In almost all Etienne van Heerden's novels (the exception is *Casspirs and Camparis*) a rural community is disrupted by the arrival of an outsider, usually from the city or from abroad, laying bare the invariably tangled skeins of history that the little community had jealously guarded.

*The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* is no exception. This time round, it's a young woman from Cape Town, one Ingi Friedländer, who arrives to buy a mysterious sculpture that has apparently arisen overnight on the outskirts of the little Karoo town of Yearsonend.

As is usual in van Heerden, the little town is rendered both as a realist locale, a recognisable South African town in a recognisable landscape, and a setting for some distinctly unconventional events. The tag for this is, of course, magic realism, and as so often in the genre, there is much interaction with the spirits of the departed. The English title of van Heerden's masterly novel, *Toorberg*, was *Ancestral Voices* – an excellent title not only for that novel but for almost all of his novels, with their insistent dialogue with the ancestors.

In this case, the actual ghosts are supporting players or choric commentators: the main figures are dead and remain so, but are present in the memory and desire of the survivors. Through Meerlust Bergh and Field Cornet Pistorius, leaders of the two rival clans, the history reaches back to the Boer War; through Karel Bergh, who marries Lettie Pistorius it is extended to the Second World War and the Italian prisoners-of-war who come to the country – in particular, then, the eponymous Mario Salviati and his gift for stone-cutting.

Around these figures are grouped the collaborators and victims, the wives and mistresses, the servants and rivals, united or at least forced together in a common obsession with the treasure of gold, the famed Kruger millions, that is reputed to be buried in the vicinity. As Ingi comes to realise, in this town past and present are fused, trapping the inhabitants like flies in amber: "The past, she thought, that's your prison, all of you."

The indigenous and the cosmopolitan, as always in van Heerden, combine to produce a uniquely South African history. In this instance, that history is enriched by the presence of Mario Salviati, whose stone-cutting skills connect the perennial African quest for water with the European traditions of sculpting and cathedral building.

It's a history of sexual intrigue, of greed and of course of racial mixing. Here, though, the more directly political concerns of the earlier novels blend with a consideration of the role of the artist. All the main figures have some artistic aspiration - above all Jonty Jack, the son of Karel Bergh and Lettie Pistorius, who in spite of having inherited a fortune, lives in a cottage and refuses to sell his sculptures. He reflects on the history of his town as a history of the artist: "And isn't the story of Yearsonend also the artist's story? Didn't Mario Salviati revolt against myopia with his statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary? And before him: Titty X!am's people who drew on cave walls; and that Captain William Gird whose drawings hang in the palace; and Meerlust Bergh and his designer wife, Irene Lampak."

Accordingly, Ingi, the bureaucrat of art, has to relearn the true business of art before returning to Cape Town with empty hands but renewed understanding.

Van Heerden's imagination is as vital as ever, apparently effortlessly producing a rich welter of characters and narratives, conjuring up the Karoo landscape, holding in suspension any number of mysteries and puzzles, before bringing them all together in an extremely well-paced resolution.

Given the sheer narrative vigour and the richness of the imagination, it's a pity that it all seems to go on for too long. The sense of tedium may be to some degree a function of the translation, by Catherine Knox, which is conscientious rather than inspired.

Van Heerden's edgy prose, with its sharp instinct for the vernacular, is flattened out into a pedestrian version of the original.

Some random examples: "Ons is stukkend van die moeg" is rendered as "We are exhausted", "doen vreemd aan" as "unusual." On "klaterend in haar stadskoene" the translator simply gives up: "in her town shoes." There are also some problems with Afrikaans words that have been colonised into English but are here pedantically translated: "koeksusters" becomes, absurdly, "syrupy plaited pastries." Since the book does have a glossary of non-English words, this clumsiness could easily have been avoided. Oddly, "kloof" is glossed, but not actually used: instead we have "gorge" and "ravine" – to particularly ungainly effect in "Cave gorge" for "Grotkloof." The most pervasive awkwardness is the translation of "blitswaterkanaal" as "lightning water channel," which at times inconsistently modulates into the far preferable "flash water channel." (And instinct, if not the dictionary, suggests that this a canal rather than a channel)

Simpler are the mistranslations: "stump" for "stomp" (log); "beast" for "bees" (ox). "Oorlogsberigte"(reports of war) is translated as "rumours of war" (in 1943 the war was considerably more than a rumour).

Individually, these are trivial examples, but the cumulative effect of such sustained flatness of tone and register is wearying. This is the more surprising in that the author himself is credited with collaborating on the translation, as is Isobel Dixon, a talented poet in her own right. Presumably a policy decision was taken at some point that the translation would aim for literal accuracy rather than inventiveness or idiomatic equivalence. This is a defensible decision, but does, in a novel of more than four hundred pages, produce the prose equivalent of the road between Laingsburg and Beaufort West.

Still, we should be grateful that this fine novel is now available also in English.