The Distance by Ivan Vladislavić (Umuzi)

Note: This is a translation of an Afikaans review that first appeared in *Rapport.*

Ivan Vladislavić's new book, like most of its predecessors, is both highly accessible and endlessly elusive. I could have said that it's post-modern, but that is such a faded label for this delicious, exuberant, knotty tangle of a book.

It starts off simply enough, as the alternating narratives of two brothers, Joe and Branko Blahavić, looking back at their boyhood in the Pretoria of the seventies. At this level it's an engaging reliving of an ordinary, loving family. Joe is the bookworm, a bit prissy ('He once told Donny Drummond to close his eyes during the Lord's Prayer, to which Donny Drummond replied: Why don't *you* close *your* eyes, you tit, then you won't know mine are open'); Branko is more of a lad (well, a would-be lad: here is his first kiss: 'I've practised French kissing on the back of my hand but I didn't imagine it would be like a small wet animal over your lips'). Branko is the elder brother, concernedly exasperated with his impractical nose-in-a-book little brother, but profoundly loyal in the face of any external threat.

Vladislavić is of course better known as the chronicler-interpreter of Johannesburg, as in his masterly *Portrait with Keys*; here he directs his sardonically retrospective gaze at the Jacaranda City in the heyday of apartheid and Nationalism. Not that the young Joe and Brankoare politically aware: their tribal solidarity is limited to the random snobbery of a little English boy in an Afrikaans city. Thus, when at the insistence of their good-hearted father they tow the car of 'some clot in a Studebaker' out of the mud at Bon Accord ('The whole place smells of mud and unhappy fish'), Branko's new running shoes get all muddy ('They're just a pair of tackies, Joe says'), and when they stop in Sunnyside, he refuses to get out of the car: 'I'm not going to walk around kaalvoet in town like a rock.'

Or when the young Dutchman, Ferdi Kouters, takes all Joe's marbles from him in a highly unequal contest, and Joe's father goes to complain to Ferdi's father, 'Mr Kouters gives his son an earful. We can half understand the Dutch or maybe he's picked up some Afrikaans, like fokken and bliksem.'

One of the great delights of this book, certainly for someone who experienced that epoch, is revisiting the slang of the time: 'sarmies' we still have, but who remembers what 'underrods' were, or 'chorbs'? Not to mention effies.

And then there is the desperate 'entertainment' of those pre-television days: the 'rofstoei' (no-holds-barred wrestling) in the Pretoria City Hall ('At each corner are flower arrangements on

meranti pedestals left over from some function hosted by the Transvaalse Landbou-Unie, tall vases of proteas and sprays of baby's breath like clouds of flies'), and the Sunday afternoons at the Bapsfontein Hotel ('Usually there's some professional act like Jody Wayne or Gene Rockwell to make it worth sitting through the roster of amateurs with their off-key renditions of "House of the Rising Sun" and "Distant Drums" … Also on the bill was a plaasjapie in a shabby dustcoat and a felt hat with a turned-up brim, an Al Debbo lookalike, doing his version of "Sousboontjies", stretching the *sooouuus* out into a gelatinous yowl that brought the house down.')

I could devote the whole of this review to extracts from this delightful book, but there is so much more happening here than a mere harking back to, in Branko's wistful (?) formulation, 'long ago, when white people were still interesting.' The first sentence of the book runs, in Joe's narrative, 'In the spring of 1970, I fell in love with Muhammed Ali', and the rest of the book is a chronicle of this love affair, based upon a massive archive of newspaper cuttings that the young Joe meticulously (but not always systematically) filed away.

Large sections of the book, then, consist in the adult Joe's analysis of the newspaper reports. Among other things, the book is a gripping reflection on media: how a written medium like the newspaper differs from a visual medium, and how both media influence our experience of an event or a person: 'The sportswriters of the 1970s waged a rearguard action against the rise of television by asserting the value of newspapers as a means of documenting and understanding the world. They were champions of the written word. …You could say I fell in love with the writing rather than the boxing.' (As we would expect from Vladislavić, the analysis of the linguistic verve of boxing writers is razor sharp and insightful.)

As a writer (as he now is) the adult Joe feels he has somehow to give literary shape to this rich horde, but he doesn't know how: 'I wanted to be a writer and the box [of press cuttings] came to seem like a key to my past. It was a journal written in code, the most complete record of my teenage life to which I had access, despite the fact that I was not mentioned in it once.'

Then he has a brainwave: he'll ask Branko, who is now a film editor, to write up his own recollections of their youth, in order to counterpoise them against Joe's narrative. In Branko's words: 'He comes in with the Pres Les box in his arms and what Dad would have called a hare-brained scheme in his head. He wants us to *collaborate* on his book. I'll make space for you in the text, he says.'

Given that the book we are reading is a counterpoint of the alternating narratives of the two brothers, we assume that, in the best post-modern tradition, we are now reading the product of this collaboration. But that is not the end of it, in this Russian doll of a book. I won't reveal the further

course of events, except to mention that it's unexpected. And that Branko's son, Jordan, calls it 'a special kind of bromance like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.'

And perhaps that is what emerges most poignantly from the dazzling plethora of detail: a dialogue between two brothers, or a recreation of a relationship, a negotiation between the brothers: as Branko puts it: 'My brother wants me to tell his story. Or is it mine? Ours? Can a story ever belong equally to two people?' I think the novel provides an answer to that question, partly through its form: what is being negotiated is the brothers' shared possession of that past that they participated in: each of the two halves of the tale needs the other to make sense, just like, then, the brothers themselves.

Perhaps what Branko says about those long-ago boxing matches also applies to the whole milieu of the book: 'the fights look better in the past tense, the distance has given them charm, if not glamour.' Would a new generation, not experiencing the same 'distance' in the same way, derive the same pleasure from references to Elvis, to Evil Knievel, to Edworks and effies? Perhaps not; and yet, I believe that the engaging humanity, the understated humour and the delight in everyday things has a timeless charm to it. Or not? Let me know, you twenty- and thirty-year olds. But read the book first. It's a knock-out.