

*White Lightning* by Justin Cartwright (Sceptre, R172)

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The expatriate novel is a tricky genre: all too often the author on a return visit to gather material for a new novel comes across as at best patronising, at worst out of touch. The sub-text is invariably that the author's reasons for leaving in the first place were valid all along.

To this tired tendency Justin Cartwright's new novel is an honourable exception. If, like many other expatriate novels, it chooses a protagonist who has to come back to South Africa for a particular reason – in this case the death of his mother – its development of this given is altogether original. It is an immensely powerful work; it is fair to warn readers that it is also almost unbearably sad. In its way as comfortless as Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a novel with which it will be compared, it is sadder in that it starts with higher expectations.

James, a forty-something failed filmmaker, can trace an alternative lineage through the feckless, faithless anti-heroes of British writers like Martin Amis, Hanif Kureishi, Nick Hornby, and the London sections of the novel have, in their disillusioned street-smart flipness, strong roots in lad literature. But again Cartwright pushes his protagonist beyond the stereotypes into an exploration of very much more than the sexual mores of the post-permissive age.

James, then returns to South Africa, buys a farm in the Western Cape on a whim, and sets about creating, as he ironically notes, the slice of paradise, "an area enclosed against the world", that we persist in believing we have a claim to.

With the farm comes a family of retainers and a neglected caged baboon called Piet.

Exploring the beach near his new home, James also makes the acquaintance of a squatter family. The novel is centered on his growing friendship with Piet and his involvement in the fate of the family, the youngest member of which, a young boy called Zwelake, is HIV positive.

Cartwright blends his narrative with James's father's researches into the societal behaviour of ants, bees and baboons, and with James's attempt to validate his father's belief that friendship between species is possible. Erudite without being pedantic, he links these themes with Virgil's *Georgics*. At issue is Virgil's conclusion that for the bees, because they have received "a spark of heavenly fire", for them "There is no place for death but living still/ They fly off to join the number of the stars."

Watching his mother fade away into death, James speculates that, for humans, "if there is no place for death – if there is some form of after-life – it can only be in this bee sense, of being part of a never-ending impulse to life". Something in him has survived the tatty exploitations and betrayals of his London life, and wants to believe in this vision: "I hope that in some way it is true that we continue to exist on a lesser (or maybe more exalted) plane, in incomprehensible ways."

Of course, life on the farm has its own tatty betrayals. James's lawyer, Anton Pennington, passes on to James his potentially inconvenient mistress Valerie. Responding to this appeal to his lust, James can summon up little real feeling for the ageing woman, to whom he clearly represents a last chance: "I looked at her under the one naked and

insect-besieged light-bulb; the desperation was coming through, like the ribs of a ship breaking up in heavy surf.”

With this kind of human contact, it becomes ever more comprehensible that James should seek in the enigmatic Piet, whom Cartwright describes with rare beauty, some bond with the non-human, some non-exploitative mutual affection.

Cartwright persuades us of James’s investment in this relationship, and of his hope that his feelings for Piet may signify some mysterious bond with the non-human.

As the novel progresses, this hope becomes ever more desperate, as life itself stands revealed as either the superficial sleaze and snobbery of London or the merciless struggle for existence in Africa,

To say that the ending is predictable is not to say that here is anything at all trite about it, There is, rather, a tragic inevitability about the failure of James’s plans, if one accepts Cartwright’s unhopeful vision of human and animal nature. While many people do manage to establish something like the little community James was hoping for, that it irrelevant in the face of Cartwright’s fictional reality. Given these people and this situation, nothing else could have happened.

In concentrating on the undeniably sad aspects of *White Lightning*, I may have made it sound ore dreary that it in fact is. Cartwright’s vision is dark, but it is sustained by a vigorous, at times humorous, prose style, and a tough resilience in the face of disaster. There is much pleasure to be had from his eye for detail and landscape and his ear for South African speech.

Also, if Cartwright is gloomy about the prospect of an African paradise, he is hardly ore upbeat about life in London: “the shaven-headed plump complacent men with their white-ant look, the weeping, sullen bricks and concrete, the jostling lumpy children at bust stops ...”

It’s a choice of nightmares; and if James at the end of the novel opts for the white ants and the lumpy children, that does not cancel out that persistent dream of paradise.