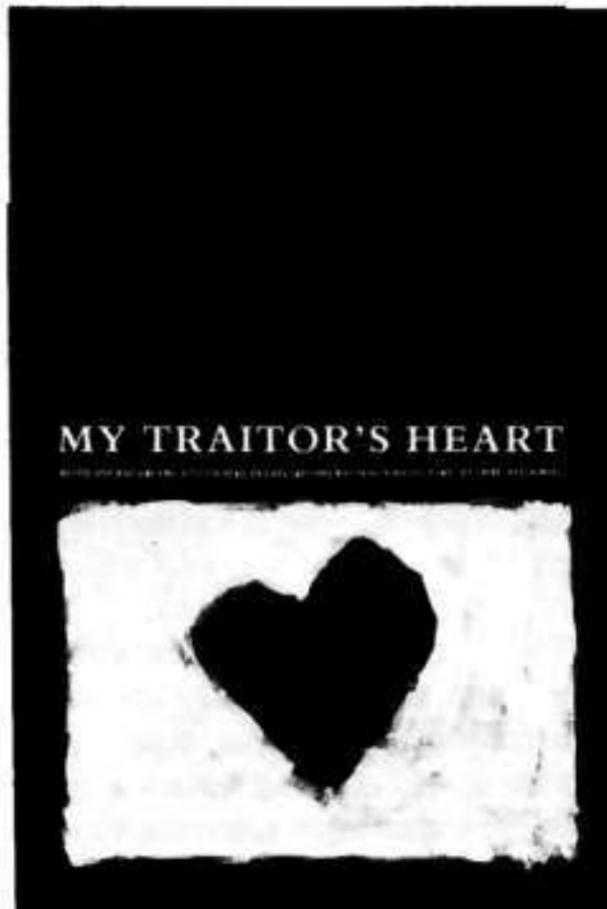


This isn't going to be an easy review



My Traitor's Heart
By Rian Malan (*The Bodley Head*)

To Rian Malan

This isn't going to be an easy review. Not for the usual, unstated reason: the yawning reviewer battled to finish the book.

I have just read *My Traitor's Heart* hungrily, lured on and on. One breathtaking, lovingly crafted, always aching narrative flows into the next.

So how do I begin? Let me tell a small story of my own, or rather the bones of a story, the details have long since washed away. Some time in the course of a prison sentence I was abused verbally by a particularly nasty prison officer - Kaptein Arend Schnetler. It was for something irrelevant that I have long since forgotten. Later when the officer and his entou-

rage had disappeared, one of the warders (Basson? Badenhorst? or perhaps it was even a Malan) glancing over his shoulder, came down to me, clucking under his breath, whispering in sympathy: 'I don't care if a person is a warder, or a prisoner, or what. You just don't speak to a white man like that'.

You see, reading your book has brought this now fading anecdote back to me. But why?

I am not really sure. Maybe it has something to do with being lured into an unwanted complicity. This isn't going to be an easy review.

Your book is written dangerously, looking over your shoulder. I don't mean in the sense that the person with the by-line 'Rian Malan' goes into dangerous, front-line situations to bring us these despatches. I mean that you invite us into your heart. There is considerable honesty in your book. It would be rather crass if I now rolled on to this terrain like a good old Soviet T64 tank and blasted away something like this:

- You tell us: 'Even the Communist Party deferred to Dawid Malan's legacy and organised under the slogan 'workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa'. Nonsense! You pride yourself in being a hard-nosed, researching journalist, and here you are repeating a long debunked distortion which even the SATV did not quite manage to purvey in its recent 'documentary' on the Communist Party.
- 'There are no classes in the United States?' No Rockefellers, no working stiffs, no unemployed blacks, no migrants, Latinos? ... Come on!
- 'Black democrats like Gatsha Buthelezi', you write. Without a trace of irony?
- Dealing with the 1985-6 period which saw, amongst other things, bitter UDF/AZAPO clashes, you speak of 'Bishop Tutu's UDF'. At this time Tutu was a patron of both the UDF and the National Forum of Azapo and CAL. But that doesn't quite suit the symmetry of your argument.
- For the same period - you give only the barest hint that 40 000 people were detained under the State of Emergency, and the overwhelming majority were from UDF structures. The resulting and massive dislocation to organisational discipline and political strategy, likewise, doesn't quite fit your argument.
- Etc., etc...

I could go on, but I don't want to be this sort of T64 tank.

and won'.

Death Squads describes the emergence and activities of assassination and 'dirty tricks' squads linked to police and military structures. The book is a useful compilation of material which has already emerged through evidence in the Harms Commission, investigative reports largely undertaken by journalists of the *Vrye Weekblad*, and research by lawyers, the Human Rights Commission and David Webster Trust.

All the major actors and incidents which were revealed during 1989 and the first half of 1990 are present: police death squad members like Dirk Coetzee and Almond Nofamela; the Vlakplaas farm near Pretoria where 'Askaris' - ex-guerilla fighters working for the police - were housed; the limited evidence on the SADF's shadowy Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) which emerged through the Harms Commission; the Johannesburg City Council spy ring.

But ultimately Laurence's work falls a bit flat: there is little information in his book which was not already known to regular newspaper readers. And his final chapter, which attempts to explain rather than describe death squad activity, lacks nuance and depth.

This is partially a result of writing without the benefit of original research and interviews with participants - an area in which Barrell's work is much stronger.

Death Squads adds little in knowledge and texture to what is already known, or could have been gleaned from a careful reading of newspaper reports. The actors and their motivations in these sordid episodes remain one-dimensional, and at the end of the book one is left with a very limited understanding of how the death squads came to be, and the nature of those who staffed them.

Barrell, by contrast, knows his subject well. *MK* includes extracts from interviews, anecdotes, some original material. The author is clearly sympathetic to MK, the ANC and their objectives. But his is a critical voice, acknowledging bravery and sacrifice, but distanced from the terrain of moral judgement.

Perhaps this is asking too much of *Death Squads*, especially given the difficulties in researching the squads in detail. But as a centralisation of material, Laurence's book is useful, and will hopefully be read by many ordinary white South Africans coming to terms with the past, and needing to know what the government was doing in their name. - Glenn Moss •

BOOK REVIEWS

When I started by saying that reviewers sometimes struggle to read books I was thinking of the novel I was meant to review together with your book. By contrast with that novel, *My Traitor's Heart* confirms me in a particular prejudice.

Most of the best writing that is going on in our country at the moment, I mean even aesthetically speaking, is in the field of journalism. Personally, I find South Africa of the 1780s or the 1980s turned into fiction a great an-aesthetic.

Your archival reconstruction of your ancestor Dawid Malan, who eloped in the 1780s with a slave woman. Who turned his back on white colonial privilege, only to emerge again this side of the Great Fish River as the prime ideologue in the Slachter's Nek, racist rebellion, beats the fiction I've read covering similar terrain. Ditto all the other narratives you weave together: the renegade NUM shop steward dispensing 'protective' muti to a band of striking mineworkers before they wade fearlessly into gunfire butchering two white policemen; the life and times of the murderous Hammerman of Empangeni; the tragedy of the Azapo Wauchope family in the midst of deadly sectarian struggles in Soweto; the Alcocks in Msinga; and many more. There is truth here, and my T64 tank is not going to blast away with claims to the contrary.

But if journalistic writing, if the New Journalism, is a powerful, compelling mode for our place and times, it also has potential weaknesses. It is not innocent, and it is not merely empirical. Through all the research there is the angle, the selection. No matter how often (and it IS often in your book) that there is a pause for pulse-taking and self-analysis, the author has motivations, some less declared than others.

Let's get back to the complicity.

Or rather, first, what's the angle running through it all? What are the motivations? You speak quite often of 'my circle of hell, the circle of white left liberals'. You also speak of your own 'Marxist' past (I could quibble, but I suppose this 'Marxism' is like fear. It might be groundless, but if it exists in the psyche of the beholder, it exists after a fashion.)

There are many shibboleths you attack in the course of your book. But at the centre of it all is a sustained attack on, an exorcism of this 'Marxism', this white left liberalism.

So let's get back to the complicity. A

great deal of what you say is absolutely correct. It connects with raw nerves. Hidden, unadmitted truths. Yes, there is truth in your book and I don't care whether you are a warder, or a prisoner, or what.

But, at the end of the day, there is also a more fundamental sleight of hand. Indeed, despite all the apparent straight-talking, the fearless testing of nerve, the to-hell-with-the-bullshit, you are carving out a nice niche - having eloped, you are now returning back over the mythical Great Fish River, to an uncomfortably comfortable place with a tough-talking New Journalism your alibi.

What is the device at play? When the 17th century philosopher Descartes wanted to produce absolute certainty, to cut through the mists of medieval scholasticism, he began by doubting. He doubted everything and thought that in the act of doubting he had secured his first clear and distinct truth.

My Traitor's Heart is forever signalling: what I am saying has not been easy. First there are all the physical dangers. This story comes from the frontlines. Township stones rained down on my car roof. I was crapping in my pants. Here is my despatch, it comes besplattered with blood. Look here and here. Ergo it must be true. The writing also proclaims its origins in psychological trauma. Here is living proof, this text, this book, this heart. Again, blood ergo truth.

(There are moments when you become quite smug and elitist about this truth framed within your sights: 'Our eyes are sealed ... Some whites see danger, some see savages, some see victims, and some see revolutionary heroes. Very few of us see clearly'.)

There are philosophical precedents for this theory of knowledge. The Inquisition was premised upon it, truth is born of blood. Hemingway, in his way, introduced it into aesthetics. Spyker van Wyk of the Security branch held to it - truth only emerges out of pain.

And what if the truth is often more prosaic, more banal, or utterly more complex? After all, danger-run or blood on the tiles is no proof of verity whatsoever.

Nevertheless, what is the supposed, absolute, bottom-line truth that emerges from your own morbid doubting? Strangely, but not so strangely, this methodology of blood emerges with, as its a priori, axiomatic beginning...Blood. Race. Biology.

'I was desperate to win black trust and friendship' you say honestly and self-

critically of your younger self. Ah, yes, here there's complicity between you and me. I recognise that yearning. I know it. I remember it.

And now all your New Journalism weaponry is brought to bear on this longing that we've shared. Every single narrative in your book is lined up to debunk that innocent and naive yearning. But you draw the entirely wrong conclusions from the debunking.

What are the stories you tell designed to say? Basically this: in South Africa, when the barricades are up, it is black and white, simple. Blood and race. The proof? In the hour of the fires, as a white your political convictions and sympathies are not inscribed on your forehead. In the time of trouble, it is foolhardy as a white to wander on to the black side of the township barricades. The naive yearning for acceptance is just that - naive.

I agree, but I do not draw your conclusion that, therefore, it all comes down to 'Africa, and the ancient mysteries of race'. The truth is at once a damned sight more simple, and great deal more complex. Of course, in a bitter war situation it would be highly naive as a white, armed only with some progressive, inner convictions, to wander into the townships. It would be equally naive of the black comrades to accept your unlikely explanations.

But this does not mean that progressive whites are foolhardy or naive to side in a broader, more general but still active sense with the liberation struggle; to work, as thousands are, in mundane, heroic or unheroic, passionate or slogging ways for a non-racial, democratic or even socialist South Africa.

Politics is not only, or not even mainly barricades and brinkmanship. Of course, many of the white comrades I am referring to began where you and I began - with a naive longing to be trusted and loved by blacks in some kind of sweeping generic way. A generic way that would, of course, carry away a massive guilt.

Well, we all have to grow up.

Our political commitments and analyses cannot be based on the desire for instant self-gratification, on some vague desire to be saluted and absolved by the dark masses out there.

But equally, Rian Malan, nor should they be based on petulant recoil into the mythology of the ancient mysteries of race.

Yours etc

Jeremy Cronin •