

Discards by Patrick Lee (Penguin)
Ubuntu by Siobhan Loftus (Quartet)

12 January 2003

These two novels are the latest in the fast-growing genre of Ex-Pat Novels, books written by ex-South Africans on a flying visit home, usually about ex-South Africans on a flying visit home. A distinguished recent example was Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning*; other instances that come to mind are Elleke Boehmer's *Bloodlines* and Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust*.

Both the present novels are competently written, skilfully plotted and deploy an interesting mix of characters. If, to a resident South African, there is something a bit alienating about both, that may be because they are evidently written in an attempt to inform non-South Africans of South African realities; and inevitably one will want to disagree with aspects of the depiction of a country that the authors may have lost touch with.

Also, the logic of the ex-pat novel determines that the central characters, though experiencing strongly the pull of the native land, will return to the adopted countries of their authors, which is after all where the authors have elected to live. This gives a certain predictability not only to the plot but to the presentation of South Africa, which must come across as a combination of *Paradise Lost* and *Holidays in Hell*.

Discards is set in Port Victoria, a remote beach community in what seems to be Kwazulu-Natal, and the discards of the title are the dropouts who congregate there to drink and to smoke grass, "people who have evacuated themselves from previous lives filled with trauma."

Patrick Lee assembles a cast of characters as varied as one could wish to meet in an environment like this: Johnny Fourie, the "de facto head of the community" who owns the ski-boat; his baitman Woodstock, a brutish Afrikaner racist; Dom Marais, former white liberal, now the local marijuana grower and dealer; his business partner, Lethukuthula Dube, a former community activist; Bob Peace, an ex-Californian originally sent to Fort Victoria to open a misconceived radios station and now staying for the marijuana; Breakdown, a somewhat uncoordinated homeless person; Simon, the free-spirited surfer; and Kromhout and Slipknot, two left-overs from the previous regime..

Into this community come two outsiders: the Chief Magistrate, Mendi Mkhize, and the thirty-something Alice Burley, who grew up in this place but is now living in London. The magistrate is brought by the death, possibly murder, of an unidentified white man; Alice is brought by a desire to sort out the truth about her past.

Lee deftly fashions an intrigue out of the interaction of these characters, notably Woodstock's unpleasant designs upon Alice set against her fling with Simon -- but the main thrust of the tale is Alice's piecing together of her own past, with the reluctant assistance of her two aunts, who still live in the family house now belonging to Alice. This quest relegates the interest of the murder mystery to a somewhat lack-lustre second place.

As is standard in the ex-pat novel, there is plenty of reflection upon the difference between England ("a world where the grey sky lay on the roofs of houses for two weeks at a time, and night came at four in the afternoon") and Africa ("In this apparently quiet place, life was lived with a richness unknown in the padded suburbs"). It follows that the sex here, like the dagga, is better than anywhere else: " it

was utterly primal, entrancing, beyond sex as she had hitherto known it, a reason for doing this. When Simon made love to Alice, he sang a song of aloneness that is not loneliness."

If Simon is the resident free-spirit and sexual songster, Dom Marais is the official spokesman on Africa: "Africa's natural state is brutal and savage and unfair and undemocratic and to enjoy Africa you must understand this and love it for this." Enough reason, one might say, to rush back to the grey skies of England.

In *Ubuntu* there is again an ex-South African woman now living in London, one Melanie Carter. This time it is her son, Michael, who comes back to Africa, but he remains in mystical communion with his mother, who has lapsed out of her comfortable suburban existence into an eight-year long silence.

Here, too, the cast has a certain predictability. Melanie's foster family provides plenty of white Afrikaner racists, with the usual skeleton of illicit interracial sex in the cupboard. Memories of the struggle are here embodied in Timothy, the young black activist who befriends Michael, and his sister Celia, who seems to be brought on for the sole purpose of confessing that she once necklaced somebody. (*Discards* also features a necklacing, like some gruesome certificate of authenticity.)

Ubuntu is a violent novel, and recounts in equal detail the massacre of the San people by the early settlers, the Sharpsville uprising, various instances of inter-racial domestic violence, and contemporary criminal violence. By contrast the San are, as has become standard, depicted as peace-loving earth people, seeking only to preserve the land that is sacred to them.

The Paradise Lost of *Ubuntu* is the lost world of the San, whose sad history we are given the outlines of. *Ubuntu* commands a longer historical view than *Discards*, and to its credit tries to link its central intrigue with an account of the dispossession of the San.

Michael is led on a long trek of discovery and self-discovery to the San family who once looked after Melanie, a trek which, for reasons slightly obscure, is linked to his mother's recovery in England. By the end of the novel Melanie has returned to South Africa as Michael prepares to return to England and the rather shadowy Janet who has featured from time to time in his memories of England.

Both books, then, provide a good read, with the local colour fairly thickly applied. At best the angle of vision will show South Africans aspects of their country they have taken for granted; at worst it may remind us that though the grass may be greener in England, you can't smoke it.