

*Karoo and other Stories* by Athol Fugard (David Philip)

5 July 2005

Writing from Southern California, Athol Fugard here revisits scenes from his South African past. In the first part, "A Karoo Directory", he gives us the stories of the inhabitants of a "location" of a small Karoo town, presumably Nieu Bethesda, where he lived for a while. The second part, "Fact and Fiction", comprises extracts from Fugard's notebooks, followed by his fictional transmutation of the entries.

The interest of the collection lies in the rare insight it gives us into the man and mind behind the plays; for whereas there are of course autobiographical elements in the plays, the dramatic form creates distance upon such elements by transposing them to the play's characters. The story form, on the other hand, and in particular the notebook, provide much more scope for the author's own intrusion.

The author in question being Fugard, the access so gained is of great interest. We feel that we are witnessing a writer at work, and, in the second part, sharing his perplexity in the face of intransigent material. If this seems to suggest that the stories lack the intrinsic interest to stand on their own, that is not entirely true; but most readers would feel that in Fugard's opting for drama rather than short stories the gain to literature was greater than the loss. As dramatist, his strength lies in interaction and confrontation, action and conflict; here, by stripping his stories down to a single character (all the Karoo stories except one are named for a single protagonist), he sacrifices these dynamic elements, and opts for a much more reflective, even elegiac tone.

The problem may be that in fleshing out his characters Fugard does not imagine them from the inside out; he imposes attitudes upon them. Bluntly put, these are location dwellers not as they might have experienced their own existence, but as Fugard wanted to see them. Thus, when two old men come to ask him for permission to remove a small plum tree that has taken root under one of his trees, Fugard feels that he is being given "another of the profound lessons in life the village had been teaching me over the years", and that he is enabled to feel "the heartbeat of that powerful and mysterious force that was driving all of us."

This ventriloquising effect, Fugard speaking through his characters, is everywhere in these stories. In "Lukas Jantjies" an old man comes to realise that "All that mattered finally in that ancient relationship between man and land was that the hands digging and planting knew what they were doing"; and in "Katie Koopman" a beautiful young woman, "a living reminder of the people who had lived in those mountains for centuries before any others" carries herself "as if she knew that hers was an ancient and indisputable claim to the land she walked on."

In all these cases it is Fugard who is drawing the connection and ascribing the attitudes; the characters are exemplars, not autonomous human beings. This is the Karoo and its people as interpreted by an essentially literary imagination. The comparison that comes to mind here is with Pauline Smith's *The Little Karoo*, in which the author leaves her characters free to lead their lives without striving to find a message in their simplicity. In the second part of the collection this process, whereby the writer appropriates his subject imaginatively, is made conscious, partly through Fugard's self-confessed failure in this instance to effect such an appropriation. He starts from a report in the *Mail and*

*Guardian* of a young black woman, Pumla Lolwana, who, holding her three children, stood in front of an oncoming train on the track between Philippi and Nyanga. Fugard has entered the report by hand in his notebook "because I felt the need to possess it at a very personal level".

But as subject the woman proves elusive, as Fugard tries to find an image that will stimulate his imagination "because the idea alone – a mother commits suicide and kills her three children with herself – is not enough for me as a writer. Ideas never have been. Some sort of picture or image has been the starting point to everything."

Fugard finds that his imagination refuses to take possession of Pumla: he cannot see her, which means that he cannot understand her. And his failure interestingly links with what one feels in the Karoo stories to be his single ploy in writing about these people: finding in their situation a glimmering of hope, a shred of dignity. This, of course, is what has characterised his plays; as he himself says, "What fascinates me as a writer is the way the destitution of these lives can sometimes invest simple things and events, even simple gestures, with huge transcendent values and resonances." He goes on to declare: "That is the fundamental act of faith in my life: there will be a tomorrow worth living."

It is this act of faith that underlies the affirmation in the midst of despair so characteristic of Fugard's drama, from *Boesman and Lena* through *Hello and Goodbye* to *The Road to Mecca*, where he elects not to dramatise the terrible death of Helen Martins. But Pumla Lolwana does not lend herself to this treatment: her despair is too absolute: "I can't play any fictional games with Pumla Lolwana."

Having recognised this, Fugard is "free to create a fictional identity," and finds his subject instead in the traumatised train driver who feels unfairly chosen to be the woman's unwilling and horrified executioner. For him Fugard can arrange a saving vision and a moment of affirmation: "I just smile and shake my head because everything is going to be alright."

This collection, then, is a valuable addition to the plays; not, perhaps as claiming an equal place in Fugard's oeuvre, but as providing a fascinating footnote to it.