

*False River* by Dominique Botha (Umuzi)

This debut novel (simultaneously being published in Afrikaans as *Valsrivier*), though firmly styled “A Novel” on its cover, makes no attempt to hide its autobiographical nature.

Characters are called by their real names and events are recorded as they happened, with a frankness that could have been brutal had it not been so clearly been rooted in love – a perplexed, troubled love, but love nevertheless.

The main trajectory of the story concerns the tragically short life of the author’s eldest brother, Paul. Gifted, intelligent, attractive, much loved, he died at the age of twenty-seven of an overdose of drugs. The novel may be an attempt to come to terms with that death, perhaps even to understand its causes; though it must be said at the outset that, wisely, the author does not try to analyse her brother’s case, nor to apportion blame for his death.

The work’s achievement is in fact its firm control of emotion; Botha does not dramatise herself and her own close involvement in her brother’s harrowing history, of which she does not spare us the often squalid details. Indeed, it is perhaps too easy to see this merely as an account of a young man’s descent into addiction and death: it is also the account of a young girl’s growth to womanhood, learning to lead her own life, while yet being witness to and participant in her brother’s troubled career: from being punished at primary school for not writing between the lines, to being ‘rusticated’ by Hilton College, dropping out of UCT, going AWOL from the army, through two suicide attempts, to his death.

The story of Paul and Dominique Botha transcends the limits of family tragedy: like classical tragedy, it derives something of its power from the stature of its dramatis personae. As a settled farming family in the Free State, the Bothas could have been simply prosperous farmers; but through their passionate belief in racial equality, they became active participants in the processes leading to the country’s first democratic elections in 1994. It would be easy to see here the not unfamiliar scenario of politically active parents unwittingly neglecting their children, as in Shawn Slovo’s *A World Apart*.

But here, too, Botha avoids facile patterns of cause and effect: though Paul clearly had issues with authority, especially that of his father, one could not say, on the basis of this novel, that his problems were caused or exacerbated by parental behaviour. Yes, the father is a disciplinarian (“It is my duty to teach you the difference between right and wrong,” he says as he gives Dominique and Paul a hiding), a severely practical man who has little truck with what he sees as idling; and the mother’s high principles come across at times as an

unapproachable austerity. The narrative is punctuated with a virtual litany of “Pa said” and “Ma said”: clearly the parents are, for the young Dominique at least, a source of largely unquestioned authority. Hers is the kind of exemplary family that sets high standards of behaviour, especially perhaps to a first-born son; but given a different psychic make-up, this could have inspired Paul to great achievement (he had ambitions to be a writer). As mysterious as the origins of creativity itself is the source of the anarchic impulse that destroys the artist: think of doomed artists like James Dean, Chet Atkins or Jack Kerouac.

Reading *False River*, I found myself thinking of *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger’s classic tale of disenchanted youth. Holden Caulfield, running away from his posh school (as Paul Botha also did from his) finds temporary refuge with an ex-teacher, Mr Antolini, who tries to bring him to some understanding of his own peril:

“This fall I think you’re riding for – it’s a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn’t permitted to feel or hear himself hit the bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement’s designed for men who, at some time or other of their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn’t supply them with. So they gave up looking. They gave it up before they ever really even got started.”

This novel recreates, in vivid and minute detail, that ‘environment’ – familial, political, sexual – that failed to live up to Paul Botha’s expectations. As a record of the daily business of farm life it is brilliant; but it’s also an acute depiction of a troubled society at a time of transition, and a heartbreaking story of a troubled young man who couldn’t make the transition into adulthood.

But what sets *False River* apart from many other tales of wasted youth is its surprising humour, making it a far less depressing read than my comments may suggest. The family as a whole have a sardonic sense of humour, and the absurdities of apartheid provide a grim kind of amusement, as when their conservative neighbours, the Swanpoels, who don’t have a TV, come over to watch PW Botha make his disastrous Rubicon speech:

Eventually Pa said, “Hierdie fokken Botha maak ons hele familie se naam gat;” Mrs Swanpoel clutched the collar of her appliquéd blouse.  
“There goes our currency,’ Ma said quietly.

Or here is Paul’s reply to a fundraising request from his alma mater, Hilton College:

Dear Sir, Please immediately desist from sending me these badly phrased begging letters. Should you not have learnt by now to live within your means? In the sincere hope of never hearing from you again, Paul Botha the 6<sup>th</sup>.

Botha records the humorous and the squalid, the comic and the tragic, impartially, with a kind of stoical deadpan. She doesn't emote and she doesn't judge. She attempts the technically difficult task of telling, from an adult perspective, a story of growing up, sustaining both a naïve narrative and a mature angle of vision. In general, this works very well, but at times a clash of registers creates a disjunction of styles, as when the very young Dominique visits the family graveyard: "I walked through the gate, sat down next to the smallest tombstone and trailed my fingers across remnants of chiselled High Dutch effaced by a century of rain."

In general, indeed, I found the more poetic sections of the novel intrusive, and less engaging than the more pervasive factual mode, which through understatement powerfully traces the painful growth from innocence to experience, from wide-eyed wonderment to sad disillusionment. Ultimately, what remains with the reader is a sense of a great, irreparable loss that has yet, partly through this novel, left behind a precious memory. In the words of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality":

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be.