

*Sea-Mountain, Fire City: Living in Cape Town* by Mike Nicol (Kwela) 79.95

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In *The Tortilla Curtain*, American novelist T. Coraghessan Boyle uses the eponymous curtain as an image of the invisible but impenetrable barrier separating well-to-do Californian Yuppies from the illegal Mexican immigrants living amongst them. In *Sea-Mountain, Fire City*, Mike Nicol explores both sides of what might be called the Espresso Curtain, the line down the middle of Main Road Kalk Bay separating the Olympia Deli from the Night Shelter across the way.

In 1997 Nicol and his wife spent a year in Berlin before returning to their home in Muizenberg, where they had lived happily for the previous sixteen years. But although Berlin had hardly been a Year in Provence, returning to Muizenberg was a shock: immigrants from elsewhere in Africa had moved in, together with “hardfaced lowlifes” from other parts of Cape Town. The neighbourhood had gone, as they say, bang.

Nicol does not pretend that he found the new cosmopolitanism of his neighborhood stimulating and culturally enriching, merely inconvenient, noisy, and bad for property values: “But while I had every sympathy for the refugees, what I couldn’t understand was why they turned their immediate surroundings into a slum. These well-dressed, well-groomed young men thought nothing about throwing litter out of the windows into the street. Just as they thought nothing about pissing against our back wall. . . They lived in appalling circumstances yet refused to improve their lot. Meanwhile they dragged down Muizenberg for all of us.”

These are the sentiments and the rhetoric one encounters daily in the correspondence columns of newspapers and at suburban dinner parties – which doesn’t invalidate them, of course, but would have been thin fare from a writer of Nicol’s distinction had he not made them part of an ironic reflection on, as his sub-title says, Living in Cape Town.

For Nicol and his wife the solution seems relatively easy: move out of “the misery and grime” to the as yet unpissed-upon vistas of Glencairn Heights. But the flight to Glencairn Heights becomes an epic struggle against incompetent officials, recalcitrant builders, and an obstructive neighbour who clearly regards the newcomers as immigrants dragging down Glencairn Heights for the rest of them.

The house they plan becomes a kind of metaphor for Europe in Africa, complete with indigenous power relations: “The double storey component recalled colonial settler houses but next to this the deck and French doors were Mediterranean. At the back of the house the steep pitch of the roof flattened over the kitchen and adjacent rooms in a clever adaptation of that essential feature of South African makeshift farm and dorp life, the *afdak*. In the language of architects the *afdak* is the ‘servant’ building to the ‘master’ building.”

The French doors, in a spirit of European solidarity, insist on something called espagnole locks, which prove difficult to find, but not as problematic as the struggle to use

corrugated iron sheeting (“Because corrugated iron has a long tradition as a building material in South Africa”) instead of the prescribed material, an inauthentic-sounding concoction called “painted Victorian profile fibre cement sheets.” Add to this the resonances of Glencairn Heights, colonial nostalgia meeting estate agent hype in full flight from the Cape Flats, and the whole project becomes a wonderfully postcolonial postmodern construction of hybridity. There is even a border war, as their stropky neighbour spitefully erects a wall to block their view of the valley – a constructive way, perhaps, of channeling the aggression that in Muizenberg gave rise to the street fights that so disturbed the peace.. Fortunately the wall collapses before anybody can piss on it.

It would be easy to miss the irony at the expense of this earnest couple pursuing the right door furniture, if one ignored the chapter headings with their sardonic confessions to the sheer middle-classness of much of the material: “Double espressos at Pannini’s,” “Choosing a Toilet,” “Suburban Anxieties.”

Though Nicol does not say so, he is clearly juxtaposing these concerns with the harsh struggle to stay alive that Living in Cape Town is for many of his fellow citizens. Not that he is sentimental about these fellow citizens. He is not even particularly compassionate: “I sensed a loss of influence, an admittance of social impotence, and with it a diminishing of compassion for those up against the blunt edge.”

It is true that the two stories that he chooses to demonstrate this – an account of a young Angolan’s suicide, and a description of some blood-stained clothing on Kommetjie beach – do not in themselves suggest why Nicol should find his sensibilities so hardened by exposure to the misfortune of others, and his honesty may strike some as callousness. But counterpointed with the search for the House Beautiful are telling vignettes of Living in Cape Town for others: Irefaan Rakiep, descendant of the man he insists was the founder of Islam at Cape Town; Maxwell Flekisi, living in a self-built brick house in Site C, Khayelitsa; Mariette Williams and Ursula Poggenpoel who literally devote their lives to the care of TB patients on the gangster-ridden Cape Flats.

Nicol does not labour the contrasts, but he does explicate the principle upon which he has constructed his account of his city: “living in Cape Town meant grasping the paradox of a beautiful city writhing with violence and pain and hurt.”

Needless to say, Nicol does not find a way to resolve the contradictions or cross the Espresso Curtain; but with his novelist's eye and reporter’s instinct for a ‘story’ he turns what might have been a slightly humdrum account of a couple trying to build a house in a difficult city into an absorbing reflection on what it means to have – and not to have – a home.