

Robert Kirby: *Songs of the Cockroach* (Spearhead)

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It probably needs to be said that *Songs of the Cockroach* is scabrous, scatological, at times pornographic, deeply offensive to any number of minority and majority groups, and at times stomach-turningly, perversely ugly. The by-now notorious sequence of dead babies that turn up in the book, for instance, seems to have no function other than to outrage the sensibilities of sensitive readers.

All this, I imagine, Kirby would accept quite cheerfully as a simple description of his particular brand of satire. What matters more is that the novel offers a skilfully contrived, breathlessly paced multiple narrative, the various strands running in parallel – or in apparent parallel, for quite a few of these strands eventually converge, in a spectacular catastrophe of near-cosmic proportions.

In this heady mix the satirical content is unevenly dispersed. Thus the appalling Dr Stanley Crayne would not, to the uninitiated, seem to have any satirical purpose; and the eponymous cockroaches are difficult to relate to any particular target, though their trainer Javelin Mango, who has spent twenty-six years in oblivion, emerges to become “yet another sorrowfully brave political prisoner, another icon to add to the tortured array of all the others.”

There are other such side-swipes that take on the new pieties of the new South Africa. For the most part, though, Kirby targets the only-slightly-revised versions of the old apartheid monsters of the seventies and eighties. Now flourishing as members of the National Opposition Alliance, these unctuous and lubricious old boars continue to stash away money in foreign accounts and wallow in the privileges of their parliamentary status, while pursuing sexual fulfilment with a single-mindedness worthy of more elevated aims. In the process they spar with, evade and conspire with a collection of equally repulsive women, worthy mates in most respects to these gross has-beens. The opening description of Mrs Calliope Bothma waking up “like a transparent sack of pink axle-grease com[ing] to life”, for instance, is entirely characteristic of her presentation elsewhere in the novel.

The main character, Rocco Bothma, who has killed almost every species of mammal, bird and fish on the African continent, is recognisably a satire on Nationalist macho, bluster and fornication. The proficient owner-driver of an inflatable penis, a device

which provides Kirby with much of his narrative impetus, Bothma is a kind of straight counterpart to Haps Benade, the enigmatic Assistant to the National leader, who, transformed into a beautiful and mysterious woman, inspires the "scandalously obese" political speechwriter, Riaan le Roux, to great feats of weight reduction and ultimately blissful dependence.

As these examples will demonstrate, Kirby's take on the political is heavily sexual. It is also almost obsessively excremental. In an essay on Jonathan Swift called "The Excremental Vision" Norman Brown cites Middleton Murry's objection to Swift's creation of the Yahoos as "a gratuitous degradation of humanity; not a salutary, but a shocking one." If at times we feel like this about Kirby's satire, it may be as well to remember that by and large posterity has sided with Swift rather than Murry. Still, I would argue that, paradoxically in a work that is so obviously satirical, the satire is not the strongest part of *Songs of the Cockroach*.

Kirby's abundant imagination and virtuoso verbal skills do lend themselves to devastating satire; but it seems a pity to expend such gifts on the somewhat limiting form of political satire, with its two-dimensional representation of defunct politicians. Noel Malcolm, in reviewing Terry Eagleton's recent memoir *The Gatekeeper*, commented that "where everything is absurdly caricatured, the nature of the underlying reality becomes completely hidden, and the reader then has no way of telling what justification the caricature might have (if any). The result is not a satire saying shrewd things about the world, but a crude morality play spun out of the writer's imagination and informing us only of his prejudices."

This is not entirely true of Kirby's satire, but it does express something of a reader's sense that Kirby has more ammunition than targets. His rendering of extracts purporting to be from the *Cape Times*, the *Argus*, and *De Kat*, for instance, bear no resemblance to the style or content of these publications, and thus can not be taken as a recognisable parody. By the same token, the references to some Cape Town academics are so remote from any kind of utterance that these people could be imagined to make, that there seems to be no "underlying reality" to the satire.

And we can sense Kirby's own impatience with the limitations of his chosen genre, as he gradually and perhaps as much to his surprise as his reader's, discovers a rudimentary humanity in his monstrous characters. By the end of the novel, the bestial

Bothma is a figure of pathos; and Haps Benade and Riaan le Roux's strange courtship acquires an almost ethereal character. The story of Ivor !Xieriewiep, the "San person" who has a cataract operation, has a poignancy that is not entirely betrayed by the use to which the plot eventually puts it, in turning !Xieriewiep into Bothma's Nemesis. Even the cockroaches have become capable of a haunting kind of beauty by the end of the novel.

Somewhere, then, in this exuberant, incontinent, self-indulgent romp of a satire, there is a wonderful novel screaming to get out. Kirby certainly has the imagination and the skill to release it upon the world.