

*Texas* by Tom Eaton (Penguin) R85

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The angel as fictional facilitator has enjoyed a vogue for a while now, in books such as Salley Vickers' *Miss Garnett's Angel* and Patricia Duncker's *Miss Webster and Chérif*. Combining a conveniently non-denominational religiosity with a certain forbidden-fruits sexiness, the angel is also useful in getting the plot out of a tight corner by a timely manifestation of divine powers.

Tom Eaton, alive as ever to literary trends, sends up this particular one in his follow-up to *The De Villiers Code*, his recent demolition of the Dan Brown best-seller. His angel is bigger and meaner than any of his predecessors: named Madadoel, he is hairy, naked and murderous, smiting old-age pensioners at the drop of a tin of spaghetti, with a fiery sword of which he seems to be in imperfect control. One cannot in all conscience picture him with Miss Garnett or Miss Webster.

Set against, or in reluctant alliance with, this "autistic hairball" is George, an unassertive, unimpressive advertising copywriter whose main concern in life is his rejection by his girl friend Rhonda. When Madadoel irrupts into his life he literally turns it upside down, starting with the toilet and tiles in his bathroom. Not content with this, however, Madadoel wants to claim George as the prophet Eliyahu Ha-Navi. Understandably this causes consternation to George and all who know him, not least his colleagues at !, the cheesy advertising agency where he is employed.

As in his previous novel, Eaton here shows himself to be a dab hand at comic writing, more particularly the outrageous comparison: Gabriel, George's touchy-feely colleague, is described as "smiling stupidly, his mouth slightly open, as if he was waiting for George to throw him a frisbee to catch in his teeth." At another point, in order to convey the effect on George of touching the electrically-charged angel, Eaton indulges in a Homeric simile of monstrous proportions, involving a mini-short story recounting a childhood visit to a farm called Rooivalkies outside Potchefstroom. It's hilarious and strangely believable.

Even when not indulging in comic excess, Eaton writes like ... well, like a trigger-happy angel. He has the verbal exuberance and confidence of an acrobat; his descriptions all but bounce off the page and ricochet off the walls. Here is Alix, George's terminally enthusiastic but dentally-challenged employer: "He stood grinning, legs akimbo, finger-pistols drawn, a snaggle-toothed gunfighter awaiting his lime jelly and sedative in some leafy institution for the jovially demented." Analyse that.

Given Eaton's undeniable gifts, it is a pity that they are not used to better total effect than here. The plot is, to say the least, rudimentary, hinging unexcitingly on George's vacillations as to whether or not to assume the role of prophet. There is no sense of events being causally linked: such events as there are, are simply strung together, as Eaton thinks up yet another target for his satire.

More damagingly, much of the would-be satire seems rather pointless. The blurb promises us a massacre of holy cows, but all we are given in the event is a straggle of some rather mangy beasts: a talentless advertising agency, a private school called Michaelmount in KwazuluNatal, a dismal cricket-crazed old-age home, a dispirited little band of pre-teen Jesus freaks – surely South African can produce a more robust herd of

sacred cows than this? And surely a sacred cow is by definition venerated by the community, not some pathetic loser?

There is little sense of the satire being driven by the author's indignation or even amusement at the foibles of his society: Eaton seems to be sticking pins into stuffed animals rather than firing from the hip at targets that present themselves irresistibly. It's of a piece with this lack of focus that the angel himself seems curiously undefined and purposeless. Eaton admittedly turns this to plot account by suggesting that the angel develops doubts about his own function and powers, but we already have one ditherer in George – a second just makes the plotting seem oddly listless, compared with the surface vigour of the writing.

I suspect the ending, which by the way explains the book's title, is supposed to be funnier than I found it; but perhaps I was slightly jaundiced by the time I came to page 220 of a book that would have been happier at 100 pages or so.

Tom Eaton can write rings around most people writing in South Africa today. It would be nice if he stopped writing in rings and gave us a good straight story.