

The Optimists by Andrew Miller (Sceptre)

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Andrew Miller must have had some anxious moments when Pat Barker's *Double Vision* appeared about a year ago, because her novel anticipates his almost uncannily. Both novels deal with a photojournalist traumatised by witnessing an atrocity, and by extension both consider the ethical implications of photographing other people's suffering.

Both, too, consider photography as a specialised form of seeing, and compare photography in this respect with other visual arts, Barker using Goya's *Disasters of War* as her touchstone, Miller choosing Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. Both novels use a quote from Susan Sontag as epigraph.

All this is not to say that Miller's novel is derivative: a novel is not a scientific experiment in which the same set of parameters can yield only one valid result, and *The Optimists* is very much its own thing: a strong, sober, moving meditation on, in Sontag's term, the pain of others.

Miller's protagonist, Clem Glass, is haunted by the scene of a massacre he witnessed in Central Africa (based on an actual massacre in Rwanda in 1994), apparently orchestrated and overseen by one Sylvestre Ruzindana, who has since escaped and is reputedly living in Brussels. Clem is driven by a need to confront this man again, perhaps only in an attempt to make sense of an event so incomprehensible, to understand what kind of human being is capable of such unthinkable cruelty.

At the centre of Miller's book, then, is a vision of human beings as both victims and perpetrators of violence. Clem's colleague, Silverman, similarly traumatised by the massacre, has nevertheless returned to some form of meaningful existence by tending homeless people in Toronto. "I found something," he tells Clem "A truth about people that I didn't have before." Clem is sceptical: "Haven't we already seen the truth about people?" he asks. "Haven't we *smelt* it?"

The novel seems to ask whether what Clem now sees as the truth about people, the African massacre, is an answer or merely part of a puzzle. The optimists of the title are those people, surprisingly many, who seem to believe that human beings do have some core of goodness. Thus Clem's father has retired to a religious retreat, where a community of old men spend their time gardening, working and praying. Clem's cousin, Frankie, is about to get married to the unemployed but chronically cheerful Ray, who pronounces "People do what they can.... I find it helps to think of them as slightly better than they are."

The traumatised Clem, lapsed out of his normal existence, is recalled to some sense of human responsibility when he has to take charge of his sister Clare, an art historian, who has suffered a nervous breakdown. At night she sleeps with the lights on to ward off the terrors of darkness, but during the daytime she wears dark glasses, as if to shield herself against unprotected vision.

Both Clem and Clare are arguably mourning the loss of their mother, Nora, who was a tireless fighter for social justice, even while going blind, and whose firm sense of justice admitted no ambiguities or uncertainties: "Behind life was a web of moral science. A

certain seriousness was taken for granted. Blinder each week, Nora lectured them on clarity, the unillusioned eye, the hard edge that thinking needed if thinking was to serve." Clem is trying to recapture that sense of a moral structure to the universe. More and more he starts to doubt the ability of photography to capture any truth; as he gazes at his photographs of the massacre in an attempt to understand their meaning, he finds "the more he looked the less it seemed the pictures had to tell him, as though, stared at too long, too needily, they shaped themselves into terrible puzzles."

But not only pictures are puzzling: Clem discovers that even his eyes no longer provide any sure moral guidance. Confronting, at last, the perpetrator of the massacre, he finds it "hard to believe that the man across the table was the same whose image he carried in his wallet," and feels that he has lost his moral bearings: "depravity should not appear in the guise of somebody's elderly relative who has spent the afternoon food shopping."

When Clem confronts Ruzindana with the photographs of the massacre, by a wry irony he himself comes to be seen as the monster: the young man with Ruzindana, possibly a relative, asks him "What type of human being ... can take photographs like these?"

To add to Clem's moral confusion, Laurencie, a young African woman who seems to be harbouring Ruzindana in Brussels, takes Clem to a museum of colonial history and shows him a photograph of two white men overseeing the flogging of a black man: "'Here,' said Laurencie, 'is an exact record of our history....The history of your people and mine.'"

When Clem objects that "These are two separate issues," Laurencie sighs "You just don't get it at all."

Thus the accuser becomes the accused, his pictures countered by other pictures. At one point Clem literally puts on Ruzindana's spectacles: "his sight began to adjust. Things seemed clearer." What if the final act of compassion demands one's identification with the perpetrator of one's nightmares?

As this incomplete synopsis will have shown, Miller's novel is tightly structured on a framework of visual references, questioning the age-old equation of vision with moral insight. He does not supply any easy answers to his own intricate moral puzzle, but set against Clem's growing confusion are glimmerings of an alternative vision: "Snared by some perversity of hope, some blind fellow-feeling," Clem gropes towards "some slight but useful faith in himself, some small, stubborn belief in the others."

Tentative as it is, this hard-won faith is more persuasive than any number of pre-ordained certainties. Miller's novel, in its tough, sceptical honesty and its spare, sharp prose, is both horrifying and inspiring, a testament of both cruelty and compassion.