

*The Tin Church* by Rosamund Haden (David Philip)

13 April 2004

J.M Coetzee has pointed out, in his collection of essays *White Writing*, that in white South African writing in English there was no real equivalent to the Afrikaans “plaasroman” (farm novel); according to him, Pauline Smith and Olive Schreiner in their different ways “approach the reality and the institution of the farm out of a literary tradition of their own, a tradition of the English novel of rural life.”

The farm novel in English, by this account, had to wait for Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* in 1974 to deal with the issues indigenous to the South African soil with its vexed inheritance of power relations.

Since *The Conservationist*, there have of course been many attempts to rewrite the farm novel in terms making sense of and to a new dispensation. In Afrikaans Etienne van Heerden’s *Toorberg* (translated as *Ancestral Voices*) placed the “plaasroman” in a context wider and more sceptical than its original practitioners could have imagined; in English there was Coetzee’s own farm novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), a self-conscious rewriting and subversion of the genre. Since 1990, there have been attempts to reinterpret rural values in the light of changing realities in such novels as Jo-Anne Richards’s *Innocence of Roast Chicken*, Jan Turner’s *Heartland*, Damon Galgut’s *Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* – and, of course, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* could be seen as a wry parody of the genre.

It is in this tradition that *The Tin Church* is placed, whether consciously or unconsciously. Set on a highveld farm, the narrative extends from the 1920s to a Prologue and Epilogue set in 1990. It thus spans a highly charged period of South African history; but it does not, by and large, attempt to offer an analysis of its life and times in political terms. Indeed one could read into the book’s opening sentence a deliberate distancing allusion to *The Conservationist*: “A child found the bones”.

In Gordimer’s novel the half-buried corpse that resurfaces is that of a black man, as a reminder, in Coetzee’s phrase, of “the dark side of farm life”. In Haden’s novel, by contrast, the skeleton is that of an interloper, a white woman, whose presence threatened the happiness of those whom the novel sees as the legitimate occupants of the farm: Catherine King and her friend-companion-servant Maria Lindiwe Dlamini, the “Afrikaans boy” Hendrik, and the dashing Tom Fyncham. Excluded from this troubled rural idyll are Catherine’s philandering father, exiled to Lourenco Marques; her outraged mother who returns to England, never really having taken to Africa anyway; and the already-mentioned interloper, Tom Fyncham’s inconvenient wife Isobel.

This is to say that *The Tin Church*, unlike Gordimer’s novel, is not in the first place concerned with the racial tensions buried beneath the surface of the land: whereas the narrative notes, almost in passing, the political-historical events marking its course, these remain in the background, hardly affecting the small group of relationships on which the book focuses. The central relationship, between Catherine and Maria, for instance, could very easily have been yet another study of friendship-across-the-colour-line put under strain by apartheid, but this is not where Haden’s interest lies: there is a less obvious dynamic at play here, in terms of which Maria and Katie are held by a bond stronger than

the historical forces attempting to drive them apart. Ultimately, this is a novel about friendship and loyalty and the binding force of landscape.

The eponymous tin church stands as ambiguous symbol dominating the landscape: known as the Kaffir church to the white people of the area, and then falling into disuse even as this, it is not associated with established religion as much as with the mixture of spirituality and superstition that, as little girls, Catherine and Maria experience here. It also comes, in Hendrik's mind and in Maria's, to be a kind of shrine to Catherine in the years of her absence, after her mother has left her father: "After Mr King left, Maria took a photograph of Katie that she found in the house up to the tin church and hung it on the wall. She put their mugs, one blue, one red, beneath it on the floor, together with the picture book that Katie had used to teach her to read."

The church becomes, then, a secular temple to the friendship of the two girls, with Hendrik acting as a kind of priest tending the altar. Guarding over the pool in the river, the turbulent meeting place of human passions and conflicts, the church is both meeting place and refuge.

The novel's strength lies in its unsentimental but affecting rendering of a life-long friendship, in spite of the vicissitudes of time and the vagaries of age, with Hendrik's devotion to Catherine keeping him "at the edge of their lives all these years". From this perspective the romantic interest, the affair with Tom Fyncham, is a secondary matter; and it may be in keeping with this aspect of the design that Tom should be the least vividly realised major character. "I still miss him," says Catherine at the end of the novel years after Tom's death, and so, in a different sense, does the reader: we have never really got to know him. For us the strongest impression is that of the two old women still bound together and to the farm in mute affection and unspoken loyalty.

It is a difficult theme to capture, because it lacks the high drama of romance or the conflict of the political novel; it is the distinction of *The Tin Church* to render its quiet subject matter with such strength and originality.