

*The Wading* by Tom Eaton (Penguin) R164

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Reviewing here Eaton's previous book, the entertaining but somewhat unfocused *Texas*, I expressed the wish that Eaton would find a subject worthier of his considerable talents. He has now done so, and written a beautifully crafted, utterly serious novel. Readers of his satirical columns or of his first two novels -- the first of which was *The De Villiers Code*, an irreverent send-up of the horrendous Dan Brown best seller -- will hardly recognise this as a novel by the same author.

In the first place, whereas Eaton the satirist focuses on an all-too-familiar contemporary South Africa, here he creates a fictitious state, Cape Formosa, a tropical island set within wading distance of an unnamed and mysterious mainland.

It is an interesting feature of recent South African fiction, the tendency to create an alternative society, breaking away from that realist depiction of South African society that characterises political fiction -- and, in a different direction, the crime fiction that is fast becoming a local specialty.

Apart from *The Wading*, at least two novels have recently been reviewed here that create fictitious settings -- Ceridwen Dovey's *Blood Kin* and Dawn Garisch's *Once, Two Islands*. As in JM Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which seems to be an influence on at least Dovey and Eaton, local relevance is not insisted upon in these novels: it is left to readers to make such applications as seem apposite. It is tempting to speculate that the authors are deliberately avoiding the limitations and distractions of a specific setting, and aiming to open out their novels to more general moral issues.

In the case of *The Wading*, South African readers will no doubt nevertheless read a South African back-history into the story of the enigmatic, gloomy Mr Muller, the relic of a repressive regime in which he clearly played an active, indeed bloody, part. Fleeing the horrors of his own past, along with his much-loved wife, now long dead, Muller settles on Cape Formosa, one of the few whites in a predominantly black ("Local") environment -- though even here, in this post-liberation society, whites tend to live in The Vineyard, along with the senior functionaries of the new regime, whereas most Locals live in a kind of shantytown called Antoine.

Muller is tolerated with a mixture of awe and contempt, his reputation following him like the ghosts that haunt about the novel. The one place in Antoine where Muller is welcomed is Rose Cottage, the home of Regina Bee, the paraplegic survivor of the liberation struggle, widow of one of its heroes, and mother of the young Steven Bee. A strange bond connects Regina and Muller-- on his part, perhaps, a compulsion to expiate his own part in the death of her husband, on her part possibly an enjoyment of the power she has over the erstwhile tormentor of her people. He visits her dutifully, indeed willingly, and pushes her wheelchair where she bids him to, submitting to the humiliation of being seen pushing a Local woman through the potholed streets of Antoine.

The novel's central relationship is between Muller and the young Steven Bee. Here, too, a subtle power play regulates their awkward interchanges. Steven is, in spite of himself, attracted with a near-sexual vividness to the air of authority the normally abject Muller can still at times assume; and Muller finds the boy irresistibly beautiful: "Naturally his appreciation was aesthetic only; he was not depraved."

The undeclared attraction between the old man and the young creates an intriguing tension in the novel. Muller is, with good reason, anxious that Steven may want to leave

Cape Formosa for the mainland; and indeed, the boy spends much of his time plotting his escape – partly as a conscious exercise of power over Muller and even over his mother. When the supply plane that regularly visits the island is damaged in a storm, apparently beyond repair, the dissolute pilot, Sauvage, and his ten-year old granddaughter Claudette, are stranded on Cape Formosa. Their presence becomes the catalyst to the ever-escalating tension between Muller and Steve, the plane itself ultimately an instrument of separation and of liberation.

The novel is extremely well written. This is no surprise -- Eaton has always written well – but what is unexpected is the lyrical virtuosity characterising so many passages of this novel. At times; indeed, the writing is too gorgeous for its own good – “The day dawned in a vast bubble of fire inflating over the sea until the horizon released it and it shrank and climbed for the sky” – but for the most part the virtuosity serves a saving austerity of vision and an understated, pared-down, emotional register. There is, finally, something intensely moving about the unexpressed and, one feels, only partially understood relationship between the two men: the old man at the end of his life, ruefully shrugging off the shadow of his past haunting him, the young man eagerly facing an unknown future and yet tied – inextricably? – to the claims of home, family, and Muller. Eaton takes his time telling his tale, and the plot unfolds only as quickly as the extreme reticence and restraint of the characters allow it to. *The Wading* is a novel to be savoured rather than rushed through. For those who give it the patient attention it demands and deserves, the rewards are rich indeed.