

*Unfeeling* by Ian Holding (Scribner)

27 November 2005

*Unfeeling* is set in an unnamed African country presided over by an “ageing despot” addicted to “power and tyranny”. Though this in itself does not narrow the field significantly, the book’s central incident – a farm killing as part of a farm “reclamation” project – strongly suggests that Ian Holding, who, we are told, lives and works in Harare, has found his subject quite close to home.

The subject is, at first sight, a simple one. Fifteen-year old Davey Bakes, son and heir to the “Big baas” of the largest farm in the district, by a fluke survives the visit of the “militia” who have come to “reclaim” the farm on behalf of the new “owner”, a very large and very unpleasant black woman. Davey’s parents are hacked to pieces, and he is taken in by his parents’ nearest neighbours and closest friends Mike and Marsha.

Although Davey is clearly traumatised, he is sent back to the posh private school in the city; but he runs away and returns to the farm to avenge the murder of his parents and claim back the farm, which has in the meantime been torched and devastated by the new owner.

Summarised like this, *Unfeeling* may seem like yet another atrocity epic, the none-too-hidden agenda of which is the propagation of the view that blacks are basically savages and don’t appreciate all the whites have done for them. Indeed that view is aggressively vented in a conversation at the all-white tennis club:

“Ja, those bastards don’t know a good thing when they see it. If it wasn’t for us whites coming here in the first place, they’d all still be running around in bloody straw skirts, warrior striped painted on their faces.’

“Fucking right. Worst thing we ever did was hand them independence. Look what a mess they made of it.”

This historically uninformed claptrap is not explicitly challenged in the novel, indeed, Davey, we are told, “wants to be like them”; but it is one of the achievements of this remarkable novel to obtrude, without preaching or moralising, a much more thoughtful and critical assessment of power relations in Zimbabwe. Whereas the novel can and no doubt will be read as a savage indictment of the Mugabe regime, it much more interestingly and subtly examines the white attitudes and assumptions that have, after all, helped create present-day Zimbabwe in more senses than one.

In this assessment the figure of Davey is crucial. At first glance the Last White Hope, stunningly handsome, athletic, burgeoning into adolescent randiness of the approved kind, a dab hand at destroying small game, unthinkingly assuming the garb of the Baas, lording it over faithful retainers like Phineas, the house boy, he is also the novel’s thematic centre, in the moral bankruptcy bequeathed to him by his life of privilege.

The novel’s title, indeed, hinges on this central ambivalence. It would be easy to see it as referring only to the bestial brutality of the militia, or the over-bearing arrogance of the “black bitch”. But again much more interestingly, it relates also to Davey, not only in his numbed post-traumatic state, but in his glory days as young prince.

He is in fact not a terribly nice young man, if by nice we mean kind and thoughtful and considerate and all those other virtues he would regard as the province of women. For much of the time we see him through the eyes of Marsha, who helped deliver Davey and

finds in him the son she never had, and at times notices perhaps rather more in his burgeoning young body than a mother would. Since Marsha is the other main figure, and by and large a sympathetic presence, we are inclined to take her indulgent view of Davey, and to see him only as the disinherited heir, the deposed crown prince intent on righteous vengeance, as Mike does at one point: "He watches the shape of the sitting boy transform into the imposing outline of a man, a sentry at the gate, defending them all."

But the novel surreptitiously feeds us little bits of information: in the off-hand way Davey takes Phineas for granted, for instance, or in his unfeeling treatment of the animals that he sees as existing only for his sport. He is really only a Big Baas in the making. In Davey the novel personifies all that is most glamorous about white mystique and privilege, and reveals its flawed, uncritical self-regard.

Since this is amongst other things a coming-of-age novel, Holding does bring Davey to a sobered sense of his relation to his environment, and the novel's climax holds a humbling surprise for Davey as well as the reader; but this individual realignment does not dull the edge of this very sharp analysis of an aspect of white Zimbabwe: its absolute commitment to the land, its blindness to the people it is shared with.

The novel's construction is a tour de force, a kind of narrative corkscrew in which past and present are intertwined and twist back upon themselves. If, after finishing the novel, you start reading from the beginning again, as it invites you to do, you discover that you are in fact simply continuing the story you have just finished: the novel is a narrative loop, suggesting that there really is no end to this story, for all that fictional convention imposes one.

Gripping as the novel is, I found the scenes of extreme violence excessive, verging on the sensationalistic. It could be argued that they are necessary, in providing one pole of the lack of feeling that the novel is concerned with, the pole of mindless brutality, against which is set the more "civilised" form of unfeeling that the white farmers have institutionalised as their right. Be that as it may, reader discretion is advised.