

*Ways of Staying* by Kevin Bloom (Picador Africa) R191  
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The title of this book would seem to suggest that it's a book-length version of those features magazines sometimes run to cheer up their readers: *100 Things You'll Miss in Perth*, that sort of thing. But this is no Mrs Ball's-and-Bluebills feel-good production: it is a sober, informed, intelligent assessment of a dire situation.

Indeed, the title, though at first misleading, has been carefully chosen: Bloom is not giving us Reasons for Staying, he is examining what it means to stay, what one takes on board, what, in a sense, one is consenting to by staying. Bloom can also not be unaware of the ominous parallelism of his title with Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*.

Bloom structures his book around a series of incidents, most of them traumatic, suffered by South Africans (and African emigrants to South Africa) in the last few years. Chief amongst these is the murder of Bloom's cousin, Richard Bloom, and his bosom friend Brett Goldin, who were senselessly shot by Cape Town gangsters early on Easter Sunday morning, 2006. The tragedy has since formed the subject of Jon Blair and Antony Sher's documentary, *Murder Most Foul*, and Bloom deals thoughtfully and sensitively with the experience of watching this self-indulgent exploration of Sir Antony's fine feelings – though with admirable restraint he restricts himself to pronouncing the film “glib”, “one-dimensional” and “naïve.”

The documentary, irrelevant as it is in most respects, is nevertheless central to Bloom's method, in that it encapsulates the kind of polarised thinking his book is designed to question, the notion “that this country ... can be divided into plainly identifiable halves; us and them, victim and killer, civilised and depraved.”

Bloom's book attempts to suggest something of the interconnectedness of South African lives: how, for instance, a young Zulu man desperate to complete a post-graduate degree that will enable him to find employment, finds his tenuous security threatened by the “urban renewal” the City of Johannesburg has been trumpeting; if Themba is thrown out of the old carpet factory in which he has been squatting, he will have nowhere to go, and no hope of completing his degree.

It is probably true, however, that most white South Africans, perhaps understandably, incline towards the kind of polarised thinking Bloom deplors. He deals sympathetically with the trauma of the Solomons family (not their real name) of Glenhazel, who found themselves one Sabbath morning with two highly aggressive men in their home. They survived, though one child was wounded, and the incident was partly responsible for the formation of the Glenhazel Active Patrol, a highly efficient, military-style operation that has all but eradicated crime in Glenhazel.

Bloom characteristically questions this: as he says to one of the people behind GAP, “I also want to know where you think the Jews stand in this country, specially since we're now funding a private army in suburbia.” When he tentatively suggests to Mrs Solomon that GAP may have a “downside” in creating ungovernable “feral zones” away from suburbia, she firmly disagrees: “I don't see a negative to GAP. Not one.”

Funding a private army clearly is one Way of Staying, albeit one that Bloom finds less than ideal. There are others, such as that of Rob Caskie, who has taken over from his murdered colleague David Rattray, the world-famous historian of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. Undeterred by the arbitrary killing of Rattray, Caskie is perpetuating his

friend's contribution, in the words of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, to "reconciliation between the descendants of those who fought on both sides of the Anglo-Zulu War."

Of course, not everyone stays. Bloom interviews at some length members of the Paterson family, about to leave for Newcastle, where Alan Paterson, the last primary liver pathologist in South Africa, has found a position. Their departure was precipitated by a violent burglary in which their young daughter was raped. The mother, who was herself badly injured in the incident, doesn't want to leave, but her husband maintains: "I can't stay."

Leaving South Africa, for those who can, is a rational decision; all that weighs against it is emotion. But that is not to say that staying is irrational: it may also, paradoxically, be rational to accept that one's emotion is strong enough to overrule pure rationality. So Bloom can not really offer a single reason why one should stay; on the contrary, almost all the stories he tells quite cogently suggest that one should get the hell out of here as soon as one can. But he does offer his own conviction that he can't take that option: in response to an American journalist's question, "How can anyone still live there?", Bloom wonders: "Forget the mountains and the bush and the ocean and the sky, did he go into a bar and talk to people? Did he see that despite their horror stories there was something about them that was vital and alive?"

And then he tries to deal with Breyten Breytenbach's article in Harper's, in which he addresses a hypothetical young person asking him whether or not to stay: "For the foreseeable future now," says Breytenbach, "if you want to live your life to the full and with some satisfaction and usefulness, and if you can stand the loss, if you can mutilate yourself – then go ...".

Bloom engages with these difficult words by questioning the idea of usefulness and satisfaction in the light "of how I understand them through the lens of the lives I have witnessed." And his feeling, overwhelmingly, is that these people are trying somehow to negotiate a way of staying, are achieving, with whatever discouragement and against whatever odds, a kind of usefulness and satisfaction they could have nowhere else.

This is not a comforting book. But it is, partly for that reason, an essential one, tough-minded and deeply moving. Buy it; buy ten copies and distribute them to your friends. It may not make them stay or return, but it will make them think long and hard about their reasons for leaving.