

The book that would eventually become known as *Ways of Staying* took formal shape on a gray afternoon in mid-December 2006. I use the modifier “formal” because up until that afternoon – an afternoon passed, beer in hand, on the balcony of a colonial-era hotel in the impossibly strange Namibian town of Swakopmund – the book had existed as an urgent but largely shapeless series of images, sensations and events. Chief amongst these had been the murder eight months before of my first cousin Richard Bloom; while I knew that Richard’s violent death had altered something fundamental about my relationship to my country, what I didn’t yet know (as an aspiring non-fiction writer) was how to uncover and express what that something was.

So the Swakopmund setting, *fin de siècle* German architecture sandwiched between a vast African desert and a cold dark sea, helped me to discover the book’s latent shape. The incongruity of the setting suggested to me that perhaps I should write about the bizarreness of my own country, about the *strangeness* of life in post-apartheid (postcolonial) South Africa, and from there the next step followed naturally: I ought to tell the stories of how people confront such strangeness – the stories, ultimately, of how people stay in this indefinite construct called the “New South Africa”, which are of course also the stories of how people leave.

Paradox and dislocation

Standing at (or very near) the top of the list of contemporary world literature that deals with dislocation and the movement of peoples is the oeuvre of VS Naipaul. A Trinidadian-born, British writer of Indian descent, Naipaul has throughout his career returned to the theme of Empire as a primary shaper of modern consciousness. In works such as *A House for Mr Biswas* (first published in 1961), *In a Free State* (1971) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), Naipaul casts the post-colony as the site of a globally momentous struggle – the place where compassion and ruthlessness, ambition and lethargy, self and other clash in brutal and often irreconcilable ways. These three novels, which with the possible exception of *The Enigma of Arrival* (first published in 1987) are easily Naipaul’s finest, cut between scenes in London or Washington DC, former and current capitals of Empire, and dirty backstreets in Trinidad or India or Africa. They are novels where oppressor meets oppressed, where power meets subjugation, where an unjust past meets an awkward and barely reconstructed present. But they are by no means novels whose sole purpose is to rage against the barbarity of the coloniser. This is because the post-colony, in Naipaul’s cosmology, is also a veritable prison: a place that (if one has any desire to better one’s self at all) one must do everything in one’s power to escape.

The severity of this paradox can perhaps be more fully articulated by reference to an observation made by literary critic James Wood in an essay published in the *New Yorker* magazine (December 2008): “In his writing,” remarks Wood, “Naipaul is simultaneously the colonised and the colonist, in part because he never seriously imagines that the colonised would ever want to be anything but the colonist, even as he uses each category to judge the other.”

It’s in the phrase “to judge the other” that one begins to get an understanding of the complexities, the endless interplays and correlatives, that face a writer who is determined to represent the postcolonial experience without cliché or apology. The Mother Country, to simplify Naipaul, may be so compromised as to be beyond redemption, but it is nonetheless She who holds the promises of freedom and progress: which is why it’s still better to be part of the faceless/foreign class in London or Washington, his protagonists often feel, than to waste a life in the atrophying alleyways of home. As Wood comments further on in his *New Yorker* piece: “Naipaul is enraging and puzzling, especially to those who themselves come from postcolonial societies, because his radicalism and his conservatism are so close to each other – each response is descended from the same productive shame.”

Shame at being the colonist; shame at being the colonised. It’s this double truth, the inherent and inviolable double-truth of life in post-apartheid South Africa, that I instinctively knew would be the narrative engine driving *Ways*

of Staying. It was here that I saw the strangeness of our situation, the source of our bewilderment, the reason for our dislocation and self-hatred and capacity for violence and desire to flee. But these responses, I knew, would all be incredibly difficult to capture on the page without sinking into cant or didacticism. In rereading Naipaul, I knew I needed a narrative vehicle that was equal to the task; I knew too that my vehicle could not and would not be similar to his.

Fear, race and identity

Coetzee offers an insight into the driving emotion behind *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the most successful book (in sales terms) ever written on or about the South African situation. “Not all readers of *Cry, the Beloved Country* may remember where the strange title comes from... Here is the relevant passage: “Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply... For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much.”

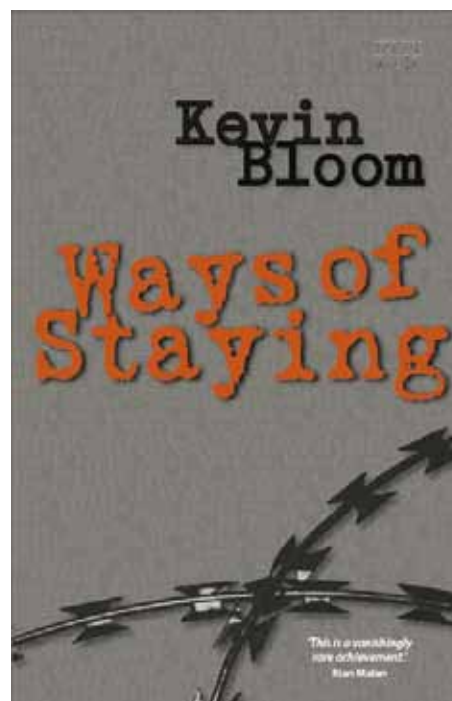
Coetzee then continues: “Though overtly the novel takes up a confident liberal stance, calling for greater idealism and commitment to Christian and democratic values, the experience it deals with beneath the surface is, as Paton’s best critic, Tony Morphet, suggests, more troubling. The “powerful emotion” out of which Paton’s novel emerged was fear for himself and his humanity, fear for the future of South Africa and its people. Fear was the emotion that had held Paton in its grip in the hotel rooms in Sweden and England and the United States where he did his writing; and the book that emerged, with its anxious ending, cannot be said to have settled this fear” (2002: 319-320).

It may be an obvious point to make, but *Ways of Staying* – starting as it does with a funeral scene, held together in its “personal” aspect by the murder of my cousin Richard at the hands of two men from the Cape Flats, and ending on the same “anxious” note that Coetzee ascribes to Paton’s novel – is also a book written from a position of fear. Given this subtext of fear, *Ways of Staying* is influenced by a long and entrenched tradition within South African literature. The case can hopefully be made by citing another two famous examples of white South African writing: Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* (1991) and one more work by Coetzee, *Disgrace* (2000).

Malan’s book – part memoir, part history, part swirling and remorseless tale of how South Africans go about murdering one another – comes after 400 or so pages to the following passage: “And so I wind up back where I began, a white man in the white suburbs of white South Africa, bobbing up and down on the cross of my ambiguities and pondering the only meaningful choice that is mine to make: to stay here or go away. I could board a plane and leave, I suppose, but I’ve done that too often before... A tombstone is still waiting for me in Los Angeles, reading “He Ran Away.”

WAYS OF WRITING

JOURNALIST KEVIN BLOOM RECENTLY CELEBRATED THE PUBLICATION OF HIS FIRST BOOK, *WAYS OF STAYING*. IN THIS EXTRACT FROM HIS REFLEXIVE ESSAY PRODUCED AS PART OF HIS MASTERS DEGREE IN CREATIVE WRITING, HE REFLECTS ON THE TWO YEARS SPENT WRITING HIS OWN STORY



I don’t want to be buried under such an epitaph...” (421).

Malan may ultimately decide to remain in the country of his birth, but it’s patently evident from these words that he arrives at this decision *despite* his fear. To leave, in the minds of many white South Africans – as it is here in the mind of Malan – is to “run away”... and this is an action one can only perform if there is something to run away from; something, as it were, of which one is afraid.

The penultimate chapters of *Ways of Staying*, a two-part narrative journey called “Ways of Leaving”, were initially written as an attempt to explore simply and honestly what that “thing” was (or indeed is).

If one had to pick a single overriding theme that informs *Ways of Staying*, that theme – for lack of a less hackneyed, over-used phrase – would be “post-apartheid white South African identity”. In addition to *Disgrace* and *My Traitor’s Heart* there are countless works that cover such territory, but for me one of the few authors that can be placed on a level with Malan and Coetzee is Antjie Krog; specifically, as regards the identity question, her major works of non-fiction *Country of My Skull* (2002) and *A Change of Tongue* (2003). Both these books sat on the desk beside me as I wrote *Ways of Staying* (the former is in fact quoted in the text) and both served as sources of narrative and thematic

inspiration when I felt myself flagging.

In effect, the identity issue – which in South Africa, as everywhere, is necessarily subsumed by the question of “the other” – is foregrounded in Krog’s non-fiction from the very start, and is to a large extent a function of the subjects she takes on: *Country of My Skull* being her painfully poetic account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and *A Change of Tongue* being her uncompromisingly candid reaction to the Conference on Racism held in Johannesburg in 2001. As Krog writes of the latter in the abovementioned *River Teeth* article (2007: 38): “The refrain right through the conference was: whites hadn’t changed, whites were in denial. And I wanted with *A Change of Tongue* to say it was not true. Things had changed. Racism that previously had been the odious job of the state was suddenly wielded by individuals; whites for the first time really talked about blacks. ‘Fuck the kaffirs’ had changed into ‘these fucking kaffirs’.”

The irony in these words is astounding, and they capture from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning: yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38); yes, we are defined as white South Africans by the voices we have for all these centuries tried to keep silent; and yes, many of us are still hopelessly and incorrigibly racist.