EXPERIMENTATION AND ADVENTURE

BY ROY ROBINS

Joan Didion once described Las Vegas as a “hydraulic model of human tedium”, and the same can be said for much of South African fiction. The majority of contemporary South African novels – middle-aged, middle-class, middlebrow – lack genuine curiosity, urgency, vitality, a desire to venture beyond the familiar, to challenge either writer or reader. This is the kind of fiction that the American novelist Don DeLillo classified as “around-the-house-and-in-the-yard” – novels held hostage by their homelessness, confined by comfort and an indifference towards experimentation and fresh perspective; novels fixated on the domestic, the minor, the mundane, at the expense of the unknown.

One sympathises with the Mail & Guardian literary critic Percy Zvonuwa, who lamented in that newspaper in May the “tedious accounts of upper-middle-class lives” and quipped that “[i]f the Mail & Guardian books editor asks me to review another novel about a white woman and her idyllic life on a farm, I will challenge him to a fencing duel!” The Mail & Guardian books editor himself, Darryl Accone, has charged that South Africa has “so many writers, so little writing” – a damning formulation that, if reversed (“so much writing, so few writers”) would be equally incisive.

Indeed, let us have more novels about fencing duels. For that matter, let us have more fencing duels about South African fiction – its conventions, its constrictions, its dwindling sales and lack of scope, what it does or doesn’t tell us about who and where and what we are – and how to re-invent it.

When old forms exhaust their usefulness, new forms assert themselves. The most elastic, engaging, wide-ranging and broad-minded writing in South Africa today takes the form of what is widely but rather imprecisely described as “narrative non-fiction”. This amorphous, perhaps even unhelpful definition is nonetheless exciting in its lack of limitation – the phrase itself floats free of pre-existing notions of rigour and regimentation. Similarly, narrative non-fiction can be exhilarating because its writers disregard (with no small amount of élan) cardinal journalistic rules, while making up new rules as they go.

And go they do – much of our narrative non-fiction takes place on the road, in alienated urban areas or rural zones infested by poverty, illiteracy and the still-heavy spectre of apartheid – and to locations mainstream writers have for too long ignored entirely.

Narrative non-fiction carries with it a sense of experimentation and the promise of adventure – the notion of a journey (the author is recording relentlessly; the prose is restless, reactive, revved-up) within a much larger journey (that of the narrative, or book).

Many of our finest writers have experimented with narrative non-fiction: Jonny Steinberg, Mark Gevisser, Ivan Vladislavić, Antjie Krog, Rian Malan, Andrew Feinstein, Andrew Brown and Peter Harris, to name but a few. These writers are exploding conventions, typing fast and losing sleep, crossing borders and driving for days, learning new forms of speech and new modes in which to record them, unafraid to interrogate power or engage with the oppressed, thrilled at the opportunity to endlessly explore.

Though these writers are markedly different in background, technique and style, many of them share a sense of community and an appreciation for each other’s work. Ivan Vladislavic seems to have edited pretty much everyone – everyone lucky enough to have him as an editor, that is.

Unlike with South African novelists, one does not get a sense of unalloyed envy: these narrative non-fictionistas seem genuinely proud of one another’s achievements. A few of them give the appearance of having formed a kind of cool club. The rest of us would love to join up – or, indeed, love to write with Steinberg’s stealthy humanism, Gevisser’s extraordinary analytical prowess and Malan’s mad – and sometimes maddening – rage. Here, in this new realm, we are a long way from “around-the-house-and-in-the-yard”. We are in the wilderness, on a planet that both is and isn’t ours.

“Okay, so where are we now?” Malan asks at one point in his busy (even for him) article, “The Land of Double Happiness Safety Matches”. Narrative non-fiction works so well because it is unpredictable, honestly contested and organically complex.

Many writers talk at length about narrative non-fiction’s debt to the novel, but that is in itself a narrow reading, born as much out of the envy of influence as the desire to classify and confine. Narrative non-fiction is inspired as much by cinema as by literature – and by everything else as well: it is a hybrid, accessible, evolving form, owing as much to high-end literature as to low-end art, gangster rap, graffitti and young immigrant sensibilities that cannot always be easily articulated. Writers like Steinberg and Malan have in common the desire to capture, condense and consume everything they encounter – or at least everything that resists easy interpretation while demanding intelligent engagement. They wish to explain to us what they encounter, and to evaluate that explanation honestly.

Fredric Jameson could just as well have been talking about our narrative non-fictionistas when he noted, in Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), that postmodernists were “fascinated precisely by this whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular...”
biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply ‘quote’, as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance”.

This is not to say that South African narrative non-fiction is unique or indigenous. Much of it is inspired by the so-called New Journalism that emerged in America in the mid-1960s, flourished during the heady, counter-cultural 1970s, and collapsed of a cocaine hangover in the uniform, hyper-consumerist 1980s. The writers best identified with New Journalism are Tom Wolfe (who helped to popularise the term, co-editing the influential 1973 anthology The New Journalism), Truman Capote (whose 1966 “non-fiction novel” In Cold Blood was celebrated as a new type of writing), Gay Talese, Joan Didion and Hunter S Thompson. Many of these writers had a long (sometimes lifelong) association with Esquire (where the New Journalism was born – arriving most pronouncedly in 1966, with Talese’s lengthy, indignant, unconventional and confrontational “Frank Sinatra has a Cold”) and the New York Magazine, where editor Clay Felker gave Wolfe and other star writers a largely free reign.

New Journalism was largely voice-driven – propelled by the author’s own voice, or an alter ego; frequently larger than life, demanding, divisive. Hunter S Thompson both was and wasn’t Raoul Duke. In Armies of the Night (1968), the Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the 1967 March on the Pentagon, Norman Mailer (himself the son of a South African immigrant) refers to himself solely in the third-person. He is “Norman Mailer”, “the protagonist”, “your Novelist” and sometimes even “the Beast”. The idealised invisibility of the old-school journalist and the narcissism of New Journalism meet in the middle, and none too comfortably.

In a 1966 interview, Wolfe said, “What I try to do is re-create a scene from a triple point of view: the subject’s point of view, my own, and that of the other people watching – often within a single paragraph.” This is not that different from the ambition of experimental filmmakers around this time – one thinks especially of Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blowup (1966) – but also recalls the recent argument of Leon de Kock, Professor of English at Stellenbosch University, that “literary journalism is unique or indigenous. Much of it is mediocre; some of it is bad. Even most – South African narrative non-fiction is exceptional. Much of it is mediocre; some of it is bad. Which begs the question: Okay, so where are we now? In his 1972 book, Media Power, the critic Robert Stein defined New Journalism as “a form of participatory reporting that evolved in parallel with the civil rights and anti-war movements.” It is this sense of participation, democracy and constructive discussion behind the resurgence of narrative non-fiction in South Africa today? Did the form find inspiration from the TRC and its memorues of her family, Antjie Krog clarifies both without cheapening either. By intersecting the personal with the political – and understanding that these two constructs are, on a basic level, indivisible – Krog emerges with an X-ray of the psyche of the country.

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