

Review

Richard Peck (1997) *A Morbid Fascination: white prose and politics in apartheid South Africa*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Lindy Stiebel

According to an opinion poll conducted early this year, approximately 20 per cent of South Africans said they were undecided as to whether they would vote in the 1999 general election in South Africa, and if they did decide to vote, they were not decided on any particular party. This seems ironic in a country so obsessed by politics as South Africa, but understandable given the disillusionment of some, post the euphoria of 1994. Richard Peck in *A Morbid Fascination* notes a similar irony in the fascination with, yet distaste for, politics in selected white writers in South Africa which is the subject of his book:

Over many years of reading South African fiction I found myself increasingly puzzled over the attitudes towards politics shown there. For one interested in politics, South African literature was particularly exciting... Yet at the same time, the fiction seemed puzzlingly antipolitical in its inclinations. Consciously or unconsciously, it seemed to deal with political issues in a way that showed dislike for politics. The combination of a preoccupation with political issues and a distaste for politics seemed so prevalent in South African writing that it seemed likely to reflect an underlying South African mind-set of some importance, one that I have called here a 'morbid fascination'. (1997: ix-x)

Peck, as Professor of International Affairs at Lewis and Clark College, is undoubtedly interested in politics and has done something rather unusual for a political scientist in using literature as a source of evidence in trying to understand the political culture of a country more fully. He works from the premise that 'literature serves as a valuable source of information about the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of a society' (1997:1). His choice of writers aims to give as wide an angle of focus as possible into the relationship between writer and political context and, by extension, what

this tells the reader about the society from which such literature is drawn. Time and again, Peck notes how, though every writer in his study refers to politics – which he defines as ‘the process by which society attempts to resolve ... political issues [which] involve the interests of, and balance of power among, societal groups attempting to influence public policy outcomes in order to determine, in Harold Laswell’s classic phrase, “who gets what, when, how”’ (1997:2) – either explicitly or implicitly, they all back away from politics in one way or another. It seems that what bothers Peck is that white writers in South Africa show a disenchantment with politics as process, but not as imaginative fuel. In a brief meeting I had with Peck in 1993 when he was in South Africa researching this book, I suggested to him that this disenchantment was possibly in part because of a collective fatigue many people felt with politics, that the draconian apartheid state had worn its citizens down, and this was perhaps one of the reasons why South African writers, from Gordimer to Wilbur Smith sold better outside the country, that audiences for South African plays were so much bigger in the US than in South Africa. Perhaps Peck, being American and more used to the possibilities a democratic politics could offer, found this a bit defeatist, but it nevertheless intrigued him as this passage shows:

It seems worthy of considerable remark when virtually none of the writing so preoccupied with political issues sees politics of any kind, not even oppositional politics, in a favourable light depicted in convincing detail. It is not that the writers *should* have done otherwise but that they reflected their society and its ways of thinking by not doing otherwise. (1997:7)

The focus of Peck’s study is literature written in English by white South African writers. However, he is aware of the dangers for an outsider of homogenising even so specific a sample. Refreshing for this reviewer is his inclusion on the same playing field of canonical and non-canonical writers and different literary genres. The time frame that the book analyses is the apartheid years, rich as they were for literature that was informed by the political processes of the day. Roughly half of *A Morbid Fascination* is devoted to popular writers and is, to my mind, the more interesting and insightful section of the book, given how generally under-researched this segment of South African literature is. As Peck points out, mass-market literature ‘gives us access to the “common sense” of white South Africa, at least to that of the more popular classes among the whites’ (1997:17), and thus is a potentially fruitful genre to explore attitudes to politics, presuming high sales figures suggest endorsement of the attitudes expressed within

the book's covers. The section on popular fiction writers starts with Wilbur Smith who, despite his professed lack of interest in politics, presents 'a mythology of apartheid more virulent than even South African propaganda of the 1970s' (1997:17). Peck's chapter on Smith is thorough, drawing from many of Smith's works – in itself no mean feat – in order to delineate central 'myths' propounded in the bestsellers discussed. Popular thrillers by McClure, whose 'non-reception' in South Africa Peck comments on, Bosman (*Willemdsorp* 1951), Ebersohn and Drummond are discussed in so far as they engage with the political system which is their context. Peck ends the mass market fiction survey with a chapter on recent anti-apartheid bestseller writers, including Bryce Courtney and the Slovo sisters who can only superficially be said to be in the same 'anti-apartheid' camp. Peck notes the success of such recent 'oppositional' books in comparison to the relative lack of interest in earlier popular oppositional writers such as McClure and Ebersohn. Certainly some of the attention the Slovo sisters' books captured was because of their famous parents, but Peck suggests 'we still need to explain the dominance of right-wing writing in the mass market in earlier years and the shift to more left-wing popular literature in the very recent past' (1997:88). This is indeed an interesting point, however it must be noted though that Wilbur Smith's conservative bestsellers still outsell any other popular South African writer by a considerable margin.

The second half of Peck's book discusses mostly canonical South African texts and their writers – Paton, van der Post, Jacobson, Fugard, Brink and Gordimer – from the point of view of the liberal or existential positions à propos politics they assume. The final chapter briefly covers South African theatre, excluding Fugard, and finds that 'its vision of politics was as distinctly limited, as distinctly unflattering, as that found in most South African prose' (1997:155). Given the wide range of this study, the analysis of South African texts and politics in the second half is, I feel, 'thinner' than in the first half which is more ground-breaking and thought provoking.

The book ends on a potentially pessimistic note – given Peck's premise that a society like that of contemporary South Africa needs to engage positively with politics 'in the sense of the debate about principles and willingness to engage in the give-and-take that permits compromise statements' (1997:169), the perceived dislike of politics shown by white South African writers is disheartening. Peck, as a political scientist studying a segment of a country's literature in order to understand its 'history from

the inside', offers a final message of hope tempered, however, with a large dose of caution:

Despite the negative attitudes towards politics in South Africa that this study has found, we must beware of forecasting doom for South Africa... It may well be that the South African preoccupation with political issues will prove to be the more important part of the South African political culture. If this study finds a distrust of politics as half of the morbid fascination with politics, the other half is a recognition of the centrality of political issues to daily life, an awareness that may well help South Africans avoid some of the ills that have beset other countries newly independent without a tradition of national political awareness. (1997:172)

A thought that arises, however, is this: has Peck fully considered the extent to which the South African distrust of politics that he has catalogued is the result of bitter historical experience, and that, in fact, such distrust may be a healthy, not morbid, phenomenon whereby political process is to be scrutinised very closely before acceptance. Is, in other words, a distrust of politics necessarily always a bad thing?

In conclusion, *A Morbid Fascination* is extensively researched, the style accessible and the contents clearly presented. It raises interesting questions for scholars of literature and South African affairs generally from an unusual interdisciplinary position. It was shortlisted for the Oregon Annual Book Award and will hopefully attract academic attention within South Africa, though the fact that it is better known in the US than here seems to fulfill one of the book's central points. It is a welcome contribution to the study of South African literature, specifically white writing, drawn from an historical period which should not be allowed to fade from view.

Response by Richard Peck

I am delighted that the book received a favourable response from a South African reader. As I noted in my preface (1997:x), I saw this work very much as an outsider's reading which eavesdropped on South African conversations to hear what was being said and what was not being said. I wished to know not just what had gone on in politics, but what was thought and felt about politics. Given the complexity of the South African situation and the myriad ways an outsider can go wrong in reading the literature and the politics, I entered on the task with as much trepidation as fascination. That I appear to South African eyes to have avoided possible pratfalls is a

pleasing relief. If some of what I wrote appears to be illuminating as well, one could hardly ask for more.

Dr Stiebel asks if the politics of the apartheid era in South Africa might not have created a distrust of politics that is entirely reasonable and healthy, rather than 'morbid'. I could not agree more. The 'morbid' of my title refers to the fascination with something disquieting and distasteful, not to the distancing which characterized the views of the authors. Indeed, I wrote that 'the writers almost certainly reflected an attitude widespread in South Africa ... a reasonable, if regrettable consequence of the years of apartheid and repression' (1997:8). I did my best to avoid implying blame even while I sought understanding of the peculiar combination of attitudes which led South African writers 'to feel hesitant about politics even as they felt compelled to be political in their writing' (1997:11). If the low registration figures now appearing for the approaching South African elections reflect a distancing and distrust which extends beyond the literary community, I hardly know whether to be more disturbed at the portents or more pleased at the success of my prognostications. What is entirely understandable can still be troubling. And pleasures of that kind are necessarily somewhat guilty.

I am delighted to hear that Dr Stiebel finds insightful and interesting my treatment of the mass market South African literature. I owe a considerable debt in that part of the book to the prior work of David Maughan-Brown, Tim Couzens, John Stotesbury, and even Dr Stiebel herself. I nevertheless felt both mentally numbed by the reading of nearly a dozen of Wilbur Smith's 500-page potboilers and overly exposed to hostile fire for treating that work seriously, even if it is 'what people actually read'. If I have managed to add something of value to the discourse on that genre, that too is praise I treasure.

But to be thought 'thin' on the canonical writers? Given the fatness of the shelves of books and articles written on that topic over the years, and the feather-weight length to which my publisher forced me to trim my obese and flabby early draft, perhaps it is inevitable that some of what remained would be relatively anorexic. But I had actually thought I did remarkably well to consider virtually a dozen of Fugard's works from *No-Good Friday* (1958) through *Playland* (1992), Gordimer's novels from *Burger's Daughter* (1979) through *My Son's Story* (1990), Paton's novels from *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) through *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful* (1981), and Andre Brink's *Dry White Season* (1979) and *Wall of*

the Plague (1984), to say nothing to some rarely analyzed works of Laurens van der Post, Dan Jacobson, Phyllis Altman, and Mary Benson, and perhaps 30 assorted plays.

On the other hand, perhaps my treatment is 'thin' in the sense of being spread too thin. It is, of course, hard to assess accurately the originality and weight of one's own insights. Either modesty or braggadocio would be suspect in the circumstances. I certainly thought I had made progress in my own understanding of the liberal and anti-political bias of Paton's works, in sorting out why Gordimer's approach to political issues seemed so ambivalent, and grasping why so many newly committed heroes and heroines march off into a total fog across the border, just for a few examples. I was pleased as I made that progress to discover that the path was not rutted with the tracks of others who had been there first. In fact, on some issues the ruts were so insignificant that I expected to be attacked on the canonical writers for being just plain wrong. Perhaps I should be thankful to be found merely thin!

I do readily admit to being exceedingly and guiltily thin in this work in its restriction to English-speaking white writers in South Africa. I will soon return to work on a companion volume on other writers which I have had to set aside for much longer than I had hoped. I can only hope that work will be as well received, however thick or thin it may turn out to be.

(This review and response also appear on the *New Southern African Review of Books* website at <http://www.uni-ulm.de/~rturrell>.)