

## Review

Steinberg, Jonathan (2002) *Midlands*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers

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Comments by Shaun Johnson on the front cover of this award-winning book describe *Midlands* as going 'to the heart of questions which are so sensitive that most people shy away from them' and as 'a fine piece of investigative journalism.' Both assessments seem inflated to me.

*Midlands* is an account of Steinberg's journey along the 'racial frontier' that runs between the prosperous but besieged white-owned commercial farms of the southern midlands of KwaZulu Natal and the desperately poor lands of the 'dying black peasantry' (p.ix) on the boundary of these farms, in former homeland and mission reserves and in farm tenant villages. The author's entry point is the murder of the 28-year old son of one of the white farmers, in late 1999, allegedly by one or more of the black tenants living on the farmer's land. The point of Steinberg's investigation, however, is not to solve the question of who committed the murder (which is never fully resolved, although the author is convinced he provides us with the answer at the end), but to expose the inherently adversarial relationships between white and black that inform this case. The murder is presented as not only the logical outcome of local dynamics but also as emblematic of broader black-white relationships throughout the South African countryside.

It is an intriguing, if exasperating, read but I suspect that the book's enthusiastic public reception resides largely (perversely) in the way in which the author reinforces rather than shifts existing sensitivities and confirms widely held stereotypes and fears about the 'racial frontier' in rural South Africa. These stereotypes include the inescapability of conflict over land between black and white, entrenched by over 300 relentless years of history, the doomed future of commercial farming in the aftermath of South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, and the primordial nature of the racial identities that animate these dramas. Thus, Steinberg tells us, the 'whole history' of conflict between black and white rural communities

runs in the prime suspect's blood (177), while white farmers are 'constitutionally incapable' (174) of understanding their black subordinates. Even he slips, on one occasion, into a 'primordial whiteness' (249), before reclaiming his position as disinterested observer.

As regards the investigative journalism, that label fits uncasily on a study in which so many key elements are fictionalised. The names of all the main protagonists and most minor informants are changed, as are all place names south of the Umkomaas River. More unsettling, the complex history of this land, that is presented as key to our understanding of current social dynamics, is doctored – historic clan names and chiefs' names are amended and events glossed so as to conceal current identities. I was also never quite sure on which side of Steinberg's own authorial frontier, between the observed and the imagined, to locate many of the encounters he describes, all of which, whether observed directly or not, come with careful attention to apparently realistic detail. Steinberg, we discover, is capable of giving us verbatim accounts of conversations at which he was not present, some of which he only imagines must have happened as he describes (82,83).

Furthermore, the views of the black tenants are obtained only indirectly, through black assistants, and quite who among the tenants is interviewed is not clear. Steinberg presents as incontrovertible, without the need for further testing, his assessment that no black tenant would ever agree to be interviewed by a white journalist. Hence his decision to rely on paid (black) informants, whom he grills mercilessly to extract every last shred of information from their conversations – 'I would press and press until they were so full of caffeine and nicotine, and the room so full of words and memories and forced inductions, that they would stumble out and hope never to see me again' (109).

Most unsettling of all, the one voice of political and moral authority to emerge in the book – that of the elderly and wise (black) ex-trade unionist, who explains to the reader, through Steinberg, what is 'really' happening along the racial frontier and, along the way, why the countryside is doomed – turns out to be not an actual person but a composite of two, both of whom refused to have any visibility, even a disguised one, in the book. How reliable, then, is the conversation between this 'voice' and Steinberg at the simple dinner in this character's rural home, as well as their follow-up conversation in the 'white men's' pub in Pietermaritzburg, where the bartender looks on suspiciously?

Steinberg does discuss the serious ethical and methodological dilemmas that his informants' varying requests for anonymity and his own sense of

responsibility to his subjects posed. These are not easy issues to resolve in any research endeavour, but his solution is a compromised one. It is not simply that the identities and places behind the fictitious names are easily ascertained, if one knows the area and accesses the newspaper and other reports on the murder and subsequent investigations. It is that Steinberg asks us to take his account of what 'actually' happened on trust and, where he has embellished or entirely made up scenes, to accept that the spirit of his account is true – truer than that of others. The irony that his methods have something in common with those of the white farmers whom he scorns, who rely on paid informers to tell them what the informers think their paymasters wish to hear, does finally dawn on him towards the end of the book (218). His solution is to insist that 'I do know that I got to hear everybody's understanding of the events' (109).

I am not convinced that he earns the reader's trust. He can be careless of important detail in his treatment of both history and current government policy – thus Theophilus Shepstone is mistakenly described as Governor of colonial Natal (62), while the account of post-1994 land reform (183) is so cursory as to be misleading. There is a certain hubris in some of his claims – until he comes along, we are informed, no white people ever set foot in the tenant village except as landlord, policeman or soldier, while the only whites who ever went to the nearby mission went 'laden with school books and food' (106-7). Throughout the investigation, Steinberg is an energetic but controlling instructor-cum-tour guide, carefully stage-managing the timing and content of the information that he releases and taking pains to ensure that the reader understands the import of what he imparts exactly as he, Steinberg, intends it. Concerning two police officers, Steinberg writes: 'Later, when I tell you [the reader] more about Sullivan, you will see that his relationship to Wessels was an interesting one' (177). Describing the contrast he sees between the 'pastoral serenity' of the 'Gudla' valley and the 'wild power of the hills', Steinberg instructs the reader:

Once you mark this contrast you realize why the scene is so unsettling. The cultivated fields appear fragile and precariously temporary. It is as if ... the wild bush that climbs the slopes of the hills could come down and take the basin back whenever it chooses. (105)

In the end, the primary character in *Midlands* is that of Steinberg himself. The book is more illuminating about his motives, his fears and his construction of the racialised world through which he travels than those of his protagonists and bit players on either side of his frontier.