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Marlene van Niekerk , Leon de Kock (Translator)

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Mol Benade, her brothers Treppie and Pop, and son Lambert live in a rotting government house, which is the only thing they have, other than decaying appliances that break as soon as they're fixed, remembrances of a happy past that never really existed, and each other-a Faulknerian bond of familial intimacy that ranges from sympathetic to cruel, heartfelt to violently incestuous. In the months preceding South Africa's first free election in 1994, a secret will come to light that threatens to disintegrate and alter the bonds between this deranged quartet forever.

Triomf Details

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Stefania Sorbara says

Aggrovigliati tra loro “*come le interiora di un frigorifero, con il motore fritto per il voltaggio sbagliato*”, così sono i fratelli Benade e il figlio-nipote Lambert. “*Troppo pochi, persino per loro stessi*”, “*Moll e Pop e Treppie e Lambert non si bastano neanche lontanamente*”, eppure si serrano, s’aggrovigliano, fino a strangolarsi, perché la famiglia è la sola “*prospettiva necessaria a vivere e a sopravvivere*”, “*l’unica cosa che conta*”, sopra tutto e nonostante tutto, e se anche ha dei segreti poco importa: dopotutto, “*ogni famiglia ne ha*”, e nessun segreto “*è migliore di un altro*”.

È un libro temerario, **Triomf**, sfacciato. Non esita di fronte al sopruso, all’asservimento, al degrado, all’incesto tra fratelli e a quello tra madre e figlio epilettico.

“*Non è questione di peccati. È questione di strutture. Da strutture da sottosviluppo derivano peccati da sottosviluppo. È così che funziona*”, dice Treppie.

È il fatalismo, l’atroce immobilità di un’esistenza sempre uguale a se stessa, eppure animata dal rinnovarsi inesausto di una violenza sempre nuova e imprevedibile.

“*Per tutta la vita abbiamo sempre fatto del nostro meglio con quello che avevamo... O con quello che pensavamo di avere perché mica sempre conosci le tue possibilità, e non sempre sei in grado di riconoscere i tuoi talenti. Si fa presto a passarci sopra. Non è colpa di nessuno*”, dice Pop.

E l’assenza di responsabilità, la convinzione sottesa che la colpa di ognuno derivi sempre da quella di qualcun altro è la linfa d’una rassegnazione e di un abbruttimento morale che sarebbe impossibile da comprendere se la Van Niekerk non ce lo mostrasse attraverso la sua prosa lucida, perfetta, maniacale nel fotografare anche il dettaglio minuto eppure imprescindibile (“*sopra ci sono scatole e riviste, impilate fino al soffitto. Dentro sono pieni di ditate nere e le guarnizioni sono marce. La mezza pagnotta di Treppie e un barattolo di margarina sono appoggiati in fondo a uno dei frigoriferi, e nella porta dell’altro c’è una bottiglia di coca ammezzata*”).

È una paratassi estrema, volta a rendere il singulto dei pensieri che s’affastellano nella mente dei Benade (“*Quattro grosse di rose. Quarantotto fasci. Las Vegas Supreme, così si chiamavano. Non se lo scorderà mai. Rose di un arancione vivo e senza profumo. Ma era il colore che contava. Sgargiante come un lecca-lecca all’arancia*”).

Un’attenzione visuale che ha spinto verso una trasposizione cinematografica di cui ho visto stralci su youtube (in afrikaans, coi sottotitoli in inglese). In realtà, la mia impressione è che nel film si perda l’elemento di maggior pregio e di forza del libro: quel discorso indiretto libero che offre squarci, altrimenti inconoscibili, sui pensieri, su come si avvitano e su come inneschino l’azione dei Benade. Il film, necessariamente proiettato verso l’azione, finisce per banalizzare attribuendo una dimensione documentaristica anziché intimistica all’intera opera.

Che è una parabola umana.

Sarcastica e demistificante nell’accostamento blasfemo alla Trinità (“*Li accontenta tutti. Padre, Figlio e Spirito Santo*”, dice Treppie alludendo all’incesto di Mol coi fratelli e il figlio), al Cristo (“*Donna ecco tuo figlio*”, dice Treppie a Mol, spingendole contro Lambert. “*Un agnello sacrificale. Innocente!*”, dice di Lambert), alla Bibbia (“*Giocavate a fare i protagonisti della Genesi. Proprio come quel primo branco del cazzo: Adamo ed Eva, Caino e Abele, e Lot con quelle sue figlie in calore, e Noè che si è fatto inculare dai figli*”).

Ed è perciò che Lambert si prepara al “*compimento della legge e dei profeti*”, nel Figlio che soppianta il Padre, o nell’epico Edipo, assassino del padre e amante della madre.

Perché la fede cristiana è una delle priorità del National Party, ricorda la Van Niekerk, con feroce ironia: “*la nostra minoranza, la nostra lingua e cultura, e la nostra fede cristiana*”.

La Van Niekerk, in **Triomf**, è stata capace di rendere conseguente l'illogicità, comprensibile l'aberrazione, di assuefare il lettore all'inaccettabile e all'indicibile, di farlo assistere, frastornato, a una madre e un figlio che fornicano, assillati dal dubbio se "*una donna bianca che scopi con un indiano vada contro l'Immortality Act*".

È riuscita a forzare il varco del pregiudizio e del tabù, per traghettarci dal rifiuto alla comprensione e dalla comprensione alla compassione.

Per tutti. Per Pop, Mol, Treppie e Lambert.

Perché ogni vittima, almeno una volta, è stata carnefice e perché i carnefici sono stati, almeno una volta, più vittime delle loro stesse vittime.

Perché, per tutti, "*la fame d'amore è una gran brutta cosa*".

Kay says

A horrible book. A vast landscape of barrenness. So awful it is difficult to come up with adjectives to fully express the desparate bleakness of this book. Any time spent reading it is completely wasted

Jillian Goldberg says

I could not get past the first 20 pages of this incredibly turgid, horrific novel. Perhaps it suffered in translation. I consider myself a reader with a strong stomach but this defeated me.

Derek Baldwin says

Disturbing tale of Seff Effrican po white trash

Jake Goretzki says

Stunning. Imagine Steinbeck taking on an Afrikaaner family - all Biblical violence, incest and poverty. Fold in some Trainspotting-level self-harm and substance abuse. Leaven it all with a soundtrack of crackling, working class comedy and vernacular word play (thank you, translator) - to the extent where at times this reads like a classic sitcom or soap (in a good way). It's just so good.

Here's a set of characters that earn our sympathy (despite their outer awfulness) that are just so very well drawn (Treppie is a sort of Satanic tormentor; Lambert is a kind of sweet Frankenstein's monster...probably leading me to those Lenny / Steinbeck memories). And it's set in one of the 20th century's most fascinating transitions, making it such a fascinating touchstone. The NP canvassers and the AWB recruiters; the cultural references...the Klipdrift, Stuyvesants and the Tedelex.

I was all set for a worthy, dust-blown epic of Afrikaaner love and death. This here is bracing, bleak and full of heart. As if to say: this story could have been anyone's. Rig a system in anyone's favour and human flaws and cruelty will still get in the way.

Margitte says

Although the setting is a poor (white trash) family, The Benades, in one of the poorest neighborhoods in South Africa, the story could be regarded as the universal plight of the poorest of the poor in, especially, a capitalistic society. Sociologically it could be justified as a testimony of how a social system worked for all its participants or not. In the Benade family's case neither Apartheid, nor the soon to be Post Apartheid era did anything to drag the family out of the miserable life they were dealt. Like "Angela's Ashes" by Frank McCourt, the story deals with ordinary people in an economic class that nobody else wishes to acknowledge or accept as part of their reality and like Frank McCourt, Marlene van Niekerk uses humor to soften the blows dealt to these people on a daily basis. What is different between the two authors is that Frank McCourt wrote an autobiographical story of his Irish family, while Marlene Van Niekerk visited the community she is writing about, for a few months. She did manage however, to tell a compassionate story and leave the reader with a deep sense of sympathy for the forgotten, often despised poor 'peoples' of the world. The language, almost a dialect, makes it a truly South African, often hilarious, story, but it could well have been any extremely poor family anywhere in America, Britain, Ireland, Germany, Holland, Australia or elsewhere. A brilliant book! It is a very difficult story to swallow for those who cannot handle this kind of poverty and would rather ignore it than mentally address it. If you couldn't stomach "Angela's Ashes" you won't be able to handle this book either. But for everyone else it is a brilliant read that will enrich your perception of life.

Kalahari.com description: Marlene van Niekerk's multi-award-winning novel Triomf tells the story of the four residents of 127 Martha Street in the then 'poor white' suburb of Triomf, built on the ruins of old Sophiatown, once the vibrant and notorious centre of black life in Johannesburg. Set on the eve of South Africa's transition to democracy, this story of a highly dysfunctional Afrikaans family illustrates the fear and trepidation that was felt about the political changes sweeping the land, and the earnest and sometimes amusing attempts to make sense of life even under the most abject of circumstances. Triomf relentlessly probes Afrikaner history and politics, revealing the bizarre and tragic effect that apartheid had on the white underclass who should have been its main beneficiaries. Translated from the Afrikaans by Leon de Kock, Triomf was awarded the CNA Literary Award and the M-Net Prize, as well as the prestigious Noma award for best book in Africa. Marlene van Niekerk is also the author of Afaat.

Ruth says

Although this is an excellent book I would not recommend it to anyone who is not familiar with South Africa as it is full of local colloquialisms. It is these touches that lend authenticity & it would be frustrating for a reader who doesn't know what they refer to, despite a good glossary in the back of the book.

Elizabeth says

Brilliant, enthralling... emotionally draining, but excellently written.

Heleen says

Ik vond het moeilijk om lang achter elkaar te lezen. De familie leeft in zo'n uitzichtloze situatie. Ze kunnen niet anders dan bij elkaar blijven maar doen elkaar zoveel leed aan. Er is mij veel ontgaan van wat er gezegd

werd over het oude en nieuwe zuid-afrika. De karakters werden mij in de loop van het boek wel dierbaar.

Rod-Kelly Hines says

This was definitely one of the most difficult books I've ever picked up...It was so dense and really took quite a bit of time to sort through. It was like Faulkner on steroids. But alas, I'm done with it.

Charmaine Elliott says

I must admit to getting in my car and driving up and down the streets of Triomf to view the house where the Benade's live - so real did this family become in the reading. Like the observer of a hideous car crash, I just wanted to catch a glimpse of these people. The terms 'poor white' and 'white trash' have been bandied about for as long as I can remember. Until this book I must confess that I did not truly understand the breadth, the depth and the horror of these phrases. With a 60 year lifespan in South Africa I was not prepared for this. Surely such people could not exist? Marlene van Niekerk convinced me that they do. I recommended this book to friends and acquaintances and was shocked to discover that some could not read it, that it was too close, that it opened wounds, that it was too realistic, reminded them of their own backgrounds...And I must conclude that the Treppie's live among us in the here and now. Is it any wonder that we are a society that has shaped a Modimole monster? An uncomfortable, essential must-read. A masterpiece crafted by a brilliant author.

Holly Foley (Procida) says

This book beats out The Glass Castle as the portrait of the THE MOST dysfunctional family. Easily squeamish should not attempt this novel. It is set in early nineties South Africa which was a very turbulent time period. This extremely poor white family gets crashed on the rocks of the turbulence both from within their family, and within the community. The characters are intricately explored. The dialect is difficult but fascinating (there's a glossary) Beware of intense descriptions of incest and other upsetting turns of events for the Benade family. Read only with extreme patience and caution.

Amanda Brinkmann says

This book is NOT for the feint-hearted. It conjurs up images of the 'poor, uneducated, whites', that became one of the many legacies of a post-apartheid South Africa. Protected before, simply because of their skin colour, living in a decaying government house, slowly but surely being surrounded by the 'new' black and coloured emerging middle-class, who are upgrading these homes - the central characters of this book, create very real, extremely disturbing, but a very honest picture of this previously protected past.

By times violent, then deeply sad and poignant, surfacing the incestuous relationships that were very much a part of the pre-apartheid era - this is truly one of THE most disturbing, yet vivid and authentic books that I have had the privilege of reading.

David says

A bit long for me, but I am not known for my readerly patience. While it evokes SA social awareness and history, it also stretches outward. I think a reader who knows nothing about SA history or politics can appreciate the novel for its insights into "white trash" existence. That's what I liked about the book. It's also useful for Freudian thinking: you'll discover some new, twisted triangles in this book.

Maggie says

This book was incredibly awful. I was miserable the entire time reading it. If I didn't have to read it for a class, I would have DNFed a couple chapters in. Not a single likable character; they're all terrible and everything they do is terrible. The "plot"/story is meandering and pointless, nothing even really happens, and I'm not at all a fan of her writing style. -2/10 never touching this again.
