

The History of Man.

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu.

Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2020. 288 pp.

ISBN 978-1-48590-421-2.

This is a novel about the depth of the ignorance of the white African, the white man who refuses to see himself for what he is: a white supremacist. It also addresses the search for the authentic expression that can lead to the belonging and love we all crave: to be at home in one's skin.

We meet Emil Coetzee as he is washing blood off his hands. He is a man in his fifties trying to make sense of his life. In order to tell his story, Ndlovu does what she did with such eloquent brilliance in her debut novel, *The Theory of Flight*: she unpacks his life story against the backdrop of his ancestry. This helps us understand how deep the struggle against ignorance lies.

Emil is the product of a love story gone wrong. As the child of parents who are naively play-acting romance, Emil is treated like a projection on a wall, his life a movie playing itself out. Part one is aptly titled "Boyhood / A walking shadow". There is only one way the story can go for a man like Emil Coetzee, and that is towards destruction—first of everything he holds dear, and ultimately, of himself and his humanity.

From the first chapter, we understand that Coetzee has a deep love for the African veld and that this guides his spirit in the decisions he makes throughout his life. His connection to the land is pure, but not shared with anyone else. He is a character that is forever becoming, always responding and sincerely trying to understand his place in the world while battling a deep loneliness. At the same time, he is guiding his ship towards becoming a "man of history". Without meaningful human connection, this becomes his life's goal—to become someone in the eyes of the world through his great deeds. This highly ambitious goal is an inheritance from the Selous Boarding School for Boys which

Coetzee graduates from with deep lessons in the structures of power. He knows what it is like to be a pawn in someone else's game. He is bullied, exploited and used by various people throughout his years at the school, and he does not wish that loss of freedom on anyone—it is not what drives his violence.

The violence at the core of Emil's humanity is a riddle faced many times in this novel, and its origin is a complex set of circumstances that ultimately convinced him that one is not allowed to love what one loves. The first time this lesson is taught, it comes in the form of his father's friend, Walter Musgrave and his relationship with an African woman, Lili, that results in a mixed-race baby. This so nauseates Emil's mother that she disrupts their entire world and Emil is removed from the veld that is his heart's home.

Then there is an incident with his father and a red hat, and again Emil has to learn that to express one's vulnerability or contradictory behaviour is to willingly give up one's power. A foolish act.

His ongoing love affair with the woman named Marion is another hard lesson in connection and attraction. Glimpsing her since childhood, when Emil finally meets this mysterious woman she is married to his school-time friend, Courteney Smythe-Sinclair. She is a free-spirited and liberated woman and perhaps this is what attracts Emil to her, though he never fully understands that. She challenges his rigid worldview and will do so all the more fiercely towards the end of the book when his own prejudice towards the "natives" is exposed.

Emil Coetzee is taught, over and over again, that as a man of the Empire one must choose between being a man who recognises the hard truths of life (such as the need for violence, the uncivilised nature of the "Native" and the other "Laws of Nature"), or a gentleman, who naively dreams of a world of equality. These are the only options available in Emil's narrative, and this gives a poignant glimpse at the restrictive nature of the Eurocentric worldview. Being a man means suppressing trauma instead of interrogating it, and allowing oneself to commit acts of violence for some greater cause in order to create a better tomorrow. On page 238 this internal battle is made clear: "When a man finds himself suddenly doing the wrong thing, he prefers to believe that he had always been capable of such an act because it saves him from having to truly investigate the when, how and why of his becoming capable". Rather hold fast to the convictions dished out by the Empire than interrogate the memories of trauma that is the source of pain.

These inherited convictions create a rift in Emil Coetzee's humanity, one he struggles to repair until the end of the book. Ndlovu's portrayal is deeply compassionate and shows a genuine intrigue with the psyche of those who hold the power to change so many things in the physical world, and yet are bound up in a web of secrets and denial that make those changes unthinkable and therefore impossible.

Emile Cronjé
contact.letheba@gmail.com
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3158-9009>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v58i2.11208>