

Travels with My Father. An Autobiographical Novel.

Karen Jennings.

London: Holland Park, 2016. 177 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-907320-69-9.

DOI://dx.doi.org/10.17159/tvl.v.54i2.2977

In his speech on receiving the Jan Rabie Marjorie Wallace-bursary for the completion of a historical novel on the life of Coenraad de Buys, Afrikaans novelist Willem Anker explained how he went about doing research for the novel:

“I went to walk where he would have walked, seeing how the anthills in Botswana look different from the anthills beyond the border. The textual research could provide me with scant facts, but no matter how much I read, Buys remained silent about himself. It was as if I could understand him better at the Bushman art on the farm of his childhood, or during a thunder storm on the way to Graaff-Reinet, than in the library.” (my translation)

Karen Jennings’ project in *Travels with My Father* is similar—exploring the links between places and the dead (primarily her late father, but also her forebears and all people of the past). Visiting Stonehenge in an attempt to “locate that something I have always missed in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*” (98) fails, but succeeds at nearby Old Sarum (104), possibly because it carries less associations and expectations and she is not surrounded by tourists there. Sometimes Jennings puts the relationship between the dead and space in familiar terms. In part three, “Living with

the dead”, she visits and describes places said to be haunted.

More generally, her theme is the transition from human subjectivity to the nonhuman world. When a person dies they are no longer one of us, “we the living”, but become part of the places we find ourselves in. That does not mean that they do not still exist or exert an influence on the world, but they become unreachable and mysterious, as all nonhuman things are to an extent. The mourners left behind are reduced to searching for traces of the dead. The autobiographical narrator of *Travels with My Father* attempts to get a glimpse of her father in the movie *Lord Oom Piet*, in which he was an extra. She is unsuccessful (121).

This becomes a metaphor for the book as a whole. Jennings seeks her father in the objects and notes he leaves behind, in the places he visited and in her own memories. He ultimately evades her, even though his presence and continued influence is concretely present in the form of the high school pupils he taught English to: “They are everywhere, these pupils, dotting the neighbourhood and all the neighbourhoods around” (60).

By thematising the limitations of her attempts at representing her father, Jennings’ novel avoids the pitfalls of some other books it bears a superficial similarity to. Joan Didion’s *Blue Nights* (2011), a memoir of the death of her daughter has, for instance, been described by some critics (Cusk; Wilmers 18–9) as running the risk of reducing the book’s subject to what she meant to the author and in so doing

being more about the author than her daughter. Jennings provides a corrective by supplementing her perspective with her father's own words, even giving him the last words of the book.

Still, *Travels with My Father*, like the memorial held at the school her father taught at, runs contrary to his wishes: "My father wanted no event to mark his passing. No funeral or memorial. Nothing in the obituary column. He wanted to be cremated, scattered, and then forgotten." (61). Her father's wish to be forgotten could perhaps be linked with his fascination with fascism. Attempts at monumentalising the dead are explicitly linked with fascism in the book through references to Lenin's embalmed corpse (23–7) and "Il Vittoriale Degli Italiani—the Victory Monument of the Italians", villa of decadent Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio (135–9). Although her father's wish to be forgotten might therefore be seen as an admirable resistance to the human impulse to enforce remembrance, *Travels with My Father* suggests that the removal of oneself from history is ultimately impossible. Just before the narrator refers to the note her father left to explain his wish to be forgotten after death, she mentions the pupils he made an impact on, approaching her in person and in letters to explain and thank her for his influence.

The impact her father had on these pupils can be seen as a positive legacy (despite the bitterness he ultimately feels about his teaching career and the school he taught at [50–1]), but Jennings also explores the experience of being unable to escape history as a nightmare (101),

especially with regard to South Africa's painful past (147), the narrator's inescapable status as the descendent of colonial settlers and therefore as a stranger in Africa (124) and the Jennings' family history (110–2). Jennings also mines meaning from the conflict between fantasised histories and official ones, as when she contrasts the romantic family history her father fabricated for his daughters' school projects and the real history of neglectful patriarchs and suppressed secrets. This is implicitly compared with the stories told to her by an old man in Salisbury, an old man she later finds out is an orphan with no direct link to the stories he tells (109). The pathos of these tales arise precisely from the ways they contradict official history and their inclusion can be interpreted as another indication that *Travels with My Father* is fiction (while also being autobiographical) and a way to elicit (successfully, in my view) sympathy for Jennings' attempt to construct a meaningful history of herself and her family.

Early in the novel the narrator mourns her father's small life, including the fact that his writerly ambitions were never realised (50). *Travels with My Father* is in part an attempt to rectify this, by including a passages of his writing, Jennings is resisting the idea of death as the end of potential and attempting to construct a more meaningful version of her father's life. By the end of the book, however, the narrator comes to celebrate the idea of a small life. She visits a bar in Plumstead that is part of a hotel that used to belong to her ancestors and realises, "It comforts me to see the world existing, people living

quiet lives like this, without show. Each day here is as the next. There is nothing to distinguish it from another. I am warmed by that simplicity." (174).

Jennings' descriptions of the various (living and dead) people inhabiting places, and especially her sketches of Cape Town, are comparable with Ivan Vladislavić's exploration of Johannesburg in *Portrait with Keys* (2006). Vladislavić's work (and urban spaces in general) have been described as palimpsests (for example by Graham 52–3 and Ngara 34)—a manuscript written on partially deleted previous texts. Freud (9–10) uses the example of the ruins in modern Rome. The value of this metaphor is clear. Previous versions of cities are everywhere still visible and the past of places are inescapable. It is the limitations of the metaphor of the palimpsest that struck me, however, when reading *Travels with My Father* (and this also applies to *Portrait with Keys*). The narrator doesn't just "read" and search for historical traces in the places she visits. Rather she is also influenced by these places and histories and even something as personal as the depression and suicidal ideation she experienced while living with relatives in Tasmania is recorded in the same sober tone and with the same intellectual curiosity as everything else (170). She refers to a note her father left of the places he would have wanted to visit, "listing them as facts rather than regrets" (175). This is also the tone of Jennings' novel. Implicitly she is also representing her own life and eventual death impersonally as constitutive parts of the world—a philosophical position that could be frightening but here

provides as much comfort as the lives of the patrons of the Plumstead bar, warming in its simplicity.

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Indigeneity, Globalization, and African Literature: Personally Speaking

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Hampshire & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 291 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-13754-220-5.

DOI://dx.doi.org/10.17159/tl.v.54i2.2978

Ambitious and bold, Tanure Ojaide's *Indigeneity, Globalization, and African Literature* offers readers an analysis of predominantly Nigerian poetry and fiction over a period of more than five decades. In particular, Ojaide is interested in how the relationship between Africa