WAYS OF WRITING

JOURNALIST KEVIN BLOOM RECENTLY Celebrated the publication of his first book, WAYS OF STAYING. In this extract from his reflexive essay produced as part of his masters degree in creative writing, he reflects on the two years spent writing his own story.

I don’t want to be buried under such an epitaph...” (421).

Malan may ultimately decide to remain in the country of his birth, but it’s patent evident from these words that he arrives at this decision despite his fear. To leave, in the minds of many white South Africans – as it is here in the mind of Malan – is to “run away”… and this is an action one can only perform if there is something to run away from; something, as it were, of which one is afraid.

The penultimate chapters of Ways of Staying, a two-part narrative journey called “Ways of Leaving”, were initially written as an attempt to explore simply and honestly what that “thing” was (or indeed is).

If one had to pick a single overriding theme that informs Ways of Staying, that theme – for lack of a less hackneyed, over-used phrase – would be “post-apartheid white South African identity”. In addition to Disgrace and My Traitor’s Heart, there are countless works that cover such territory, but for me one of the few authors that can be placed on a level with Malan and Coetzee is Antjie Krog, specifically, as regards the identity question, her major works of non-fiction Country of My Skull (2002) and A Change of Tongue (2003). Both these books sat on the desk beside me as I wrote Ways of Staying (the former is in fact quoted in the text) and both served as sources of narrative and thematic inspiration when I felt myself flagging.

In effect, the identity issue – which in South Africa, as everywhere, is necessarily subsumed by the question of “the other” – is foregrounded in Krog’s non-fiction from the very start, and is to a large extent a function of the subjects she takes on: Country of My Skull being her painfully poetic account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and A Change of Tongue being her uncompromisingly candid reaction to the Conference on Racism held in Johannesburg in 2001. As Krog writes of the latter in the abovementioned River Teeth article (2007: 38): “The refrain right through the conference was: whites hadn’t changed, whites were in denial. And I wanted with A Change of Tongue to say it was not true. Things had changed. Racism that previously had been the odious job of the state was suddenly wielded by individuals; whites for the first time really talked about blacks. ‘Fuck the kafirs’ had changed into ‘these fucking kaffirs’.”

The irony in these words is astounding, and they capture from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning; yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38); yes, we are from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning; yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38); yes, we are from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning; yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38); yes, we are from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning; yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38); yes, we are from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning; yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38); yes, we are from another angle the paradox leitmotif to which I keep returning; yes, Krog says, the most illuminating voice for her as a white writer is the black voice (2007: 38).