Mongrel: Essays.
William Dicey. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2016. 220 pp. ISBN 9781415206881.
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If I had the liberty to run an introductory course on South African history, I might well start with William Dicey's *Borderline* (2004). *Borderline* recounts Dicey and some friends' canoe trip down the Orange River, from Orania to the sea. It's by turns lyrical and funny, and rich with historical perspectives stimulated by people and places Dicey encounters *en route*.

Some of *Borderline*'s raffish quirkiness and range reappears in *Mongrel*, Dicey's first book since then—a welcome return by a gifted observer and writer. It is a clutch of half a dozen varied essays, and also something of a meditation on essay-writing itself. One of the epigraphs to *Mongrel*, by Hugh Walker, appropriately reads: "[J]ust as, in the days before enclosures, stray cattle found their way to the unfenced common, so the strays of literature have tended towards the ill-defined plot of the essay."

Indeed, these essays are in a sense unclassifiable. The collection's title is picked up just once in the book, and it's a reference not to dogs (despite Thomas Cartwright's charming cover drawing of a relaxed Jack Russell), but to the essay itself. Dicey (via a kind of *alter ego*, one Michael D'Arcy) quotes Herman Melville: "Truth, uncompromisingly told, will always have its ragged edges." D'Arcy, which is to say Dicey, "is drawn to this ragged edge and to the mongrel forms that hug it, the confessional book review, the novel that reads like a user's manual, the essay that moves freely between the real and the imagined" (210).

Michael D'Arcy appears in the last, just such essay, one of two quirky riffs on writing as process. This piece relates how Dicey has become the literary executor of the work of a sort of doppelgänger: Michael D'Arcy has unaccountably disappeared. Dicey's discussion of D'Arcy's works, including a voluminous exploration of Cape Town's central thoroughfare, entitled *Main Road*, sounds fascinating. One is sent scampering to Kalahari or Loot for copies [...] I'll leave it to readers to unravel for themselves what's going on here. The preceding essay is a kind of hyper-learned riff on the academic pretension of the footnote: the naturally meandering quality of the essay is exaggerated into a piece consisting vastly more of footnotes than main text, bulging with literary allusions. As some of Dicey's own references indicate, it's hardly the first time this satirical gambit has been deployed: J. G. Ballard and David Foster Wallace are particularly strong predecessors, with a bit of Borges thrown in.

More weighty than these bookish exuberances are the other essays—on the cultural phenomenon of Calvinia's Hantam Meat Festival; on employer-worker relations on a Ceres farm (which is mostly where Dicey has been working this silent decade); on a traverse of India; and on a remarkable but unremarked Cape Town murder case. The investigation of Karoo carnivory is part journalism, part personal travelogue, cultural understanding

laced with satire. Behind it hovers David Foster Wallace's famous essay "Consider the Lobster". Cunningly, Dicey refracts the more biting views of this bastion of desert Afrikanerdom through his travelling companion Justin, who takes a "deconstructionist" view of things. "Actually," Justin says at one point, "this whole place is another time. It's archival." Despite the patent awfulness of the lamb slaughter, the grisly backroom manufacture of the *wors*, the apparently oblivious parading of the teenage contestants for Miss Meat Festival alongside three nakedly hanging sheep carcasses (great material for feminist Carol J. Adams), the narrow seriousness with which the organisers and participants take themselves and their cultural icons—despite all this Dicey generates a certain affection for them, their ordinary earthiness rendered by the writer's wry and wiry observation into something, if not exactly marvellous, compellingly defamiliarised.

If here one detects hints of Ivan Vladislavić (an acknowledged fond inspiration), and a hybridity reminiscent of the essays of the Julia Martin of *Writing Home* and *A Millimetre of Dust*, the next two portraits of South African life might be underwritten, respectively, by the Jonny Steinberg of *Midlands* and *The Number*. Dicey's scary portrayal of the humanity and the financial entrapments of Cape Winelands workers is ironically entitled "South African Pastoral". Dicey is well capable of pastoral lyricism—a "lichened archipelago", a "vegetable patch, where mielies grew broad as biceps and green beans dangled dense as string curtains" (95)—but there is always, metaphorically, a distant "column of dark, oil-based smoke press[ing] up into the blameless sky" (94). The tension exemplifies a deeply sobering view of that recently turbulent sector. Dicey knows this world intimately, so that personal experience can authenticate provocative generalisations: "When I'm in Cape Town, I seldom discuss ethnic difference. If the topic arises, I downplay its significance. It seems a necessary corrective to our racially obsessed past. In the Boland, behaviour of this sort would mark me as a crazy ideologue. And, in a sense, I would be. Things are raw out here, unreconstructed. Ethnicity informs just about every human interaction. If you turn a blind eye to it, you'll never grasp the intricacies of the thousand little actions that together constitute daily life." (112)

A broader kind of anti-pastoral is closest in tenor to *Borderline*, the essay entitled "No Ship Exists". This is a mingling of travel story—Dicey in India—and a meditation on the vast environmental implications of Derrick Jensen's book *Endgame*, his anarchistic jeremiad against the follies of modern society. The global scope of thought intertwines provocatively with the minutiae of cultural encounter on the personal journey. I am reminded a little of Peter Mathiessen grappling with Buddhist texts in *The Snow Leopard*, or Helen Macdonald with T. H. White's falconry book in *H is for Hawk*. Dicey finds Jensen by turns persuasive and crazy, and his argument with him is beautifully executed. Few of us I imagine would disagree with Dicey's position

(not exactly a conclusion, he's too canny for that trap): "One of the difficulties in thinking about environmental collapse is the sheer scale of the problem. The entire planet is at stake and all you have at your disposal is a fleeting human life. It's extremely difficult to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem without freaking out about it. You ping between hope and hopelessness, between the belief that you can do something and the belief that you can't do anything at all." (155)

One thing one can do, of course, is write—and everyone has a story, even the most apparently unremarkable. Such is the episodic narrative of a Cape murder case which—despite the facts being widely known in the community, yet wholly ignored by the media—dragged on for years and years due to multiple overlapping incompetencies. The piece is tellingly entitled "A Story in which Everyone Looks Bad". Even the poor murdered man emerges from the achingly gradual revelations of the trial as somewhat ambiguous. The point is that hundreds of such botched scenarios are being enacted nationally throughout a judicial system cracking at every seam—not only on Mitchells Plain.

Dicey thankfully refrains from political grandstanding, even where the inferences are clear. Here and there he will break into a trenchant overview. Echoing Dorothy Driver, speaking (perhaps apocryphally) when she and husband J. M. Coetzee emigrated, he says: "Sometimes I also feel too tender for this country. Never mind the systemic mediocrity, the toxic public discourse, the ever-present threat of violence." But the repulsion is immediately countered by a kind of loyalty to highly localised textures and even conflicts: "I know that if I relocated to Adelaide, or even to one of Cape Town's enclaves of whiteness, my existence would be impoverished. I need the workers at least as much as they need me, their earthiness, their vibrancy and diversity, their struggles so human, so pressing, so real" (120).

Mostly, then, William Dicey is concerned to tell the characterful story of human encounters, in his uniquely shaggy, intelligent way. *Mongrel* is an entrancingly readable addition to a genre which deserves stronger development in South Africa—we could do with more such mongrels straying over the ragged edges of our astonishing commons.

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