

Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight

Barbara Adair.

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“Oh fuck, I can’t seem to write anything that is not a cliché,” (86) exclaims Freddie, one of the characters in Barbara Adair’s second novel, *End* (2007). In her latest, *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...*, Adair pushes to the limits not only this preoccupation with predictably overdetermined categories of interpretation and identity, but also the questions of intertextuality and relationality that she began to explore in *End* as well as in her first novel, *In Tangier We Killed the Blue Parrot* (2004).

Volker is a German traveller waiting for his connecting flight to Namibia in Paris’s Charles de Gaulle airport, and it is through him and his wanderings in the airport that Adair grounds the onslaught of ironically stereotypical observations about the various people he encounters. Claudine, the transgender flight attendant who had attended to Volker on the plane, for example, is described as “thirty, almost past the sell-by date for an air hostess, or is it flight attendant, but she can probably make it through the next few years, these days it is frowned upon to discriminate against the elderly” (10). Adair further writes that Lufthansa, the airline that Claudine works for, “although it is German and therefore has a suspect past, had put all prejudice and bigotry behind them. They now employ transsexuals, and, of course, Jews” (11). This sense of ambiguity—that is, whether Adair’s questioning of political correctness, which for her appears to traffic in the same kind of default, predetermined discourse as

the cliché, verges into the questionable—pervades the entirety of *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight...*

Other characters that Volker happens upon in the airport include Charles Grayson Smith Jr, a gay professor of economics at Harvard who “has been accused of plagiarism” (5) by a female student; Jim, who works in the airport curio shop and also likes to call himself Peter because of his resemblance to the well-known “American adventurer, hunter and photographer” (63), Peter Beard; Maria and Velda, two women who work as cleaners but also make artistic pornography in the storage room of the airport’s bathrooms with Dick, the director who is “slim and always wears clothes that have a very conspicuous label on them” (109); Karl, a “terrorist, a terrorist clown, a terrorist dwarf, a terrorist with dwarfism” who turns out to have “no cause but his own” (79); and Klint du Toit, a paedophile on whose shaven scalp is visible “the outline of a pink tattooed swastika” (88) and who is sexually involved with his 14-year-old “son who is not his son” (88), George.

Throughout the somewhat plotless novel that is *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...*, in which nothing and everything happens, Adair interweaves unattributed quotations, sometimes slightly tweaked, from other (white) writers—such as Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), Samuel Beckett (on James Joyce), Albert Camus (*The Fall*), Ralph Waldo Emerson (the essay on self-reliance) and Italo Calvino (*If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller*)—and even her own previous work (a self-published pamphlet ostensibly about a road trip to Namibia, *6h00 In Somewhere, and Many Hours Later Somewhere Else*). Adair makes this intertextuality clear right at the start: “All good writers borrow; all remarkable writers steal. Some of these words and lines are stolen from others” (1). This perhaps-contentious citation practice is something that Adair has engaged with since *In Tangier We Killed the Blue Parrot*, where she writes, in the opening acknowledgements, that “[r]eaders of this book will know these words or sentences or paragraphs or poetry. They will know who wrote them. They will know where the words come from. They will also know why they are placed where they are in my text”.

The danger of this play—or stealing—in *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight ...* is that the reader might not know and thus miss it, and the satire, altogether. Volker muses, for example, that “[b]lack people have much melatonin in their skin, hence their skin is black, dirty, messy, without light, dark and illegal, disastrous and dismal, this is why white people came from Europe and black people, horrible, malignant and grotesque, unhappy and

unlucky, from Africa” (94, emphasis in original). This is obviously eyebrow-raising if the reader is unaware that the italicised text is drawn from well-known South African artist Anton Kannemeyer’s “B is for Black”, a comic-strip style lithograph from *Alphabet of Democracy* that critiques colonial representations of racial difference. In Kannemeyer’s print, a black man is represented with frizzy hair and thick, red lips, underneath which is the supposed dictionary definition of “black”, which reads: “black *adj.* opposite of white, dirty, messy, without light, dark, illegal, dim, smuggled, sombre, disastrous, dismal, obscure, sullen, bad-tempered, angry, horrible, grotesque, malignant, unlucky, unhappy, depressed” (8).

This concern with the interconnections between texts and, more critically, between people, is what I think Adair is ultimately exploring in *Will, the Passenger Delaying Flight* Throughout the novel, Adair asks again and again, by saturating and pushing identity categories to their extremes, whether it is possible for different people to begin to sincerely understand and relate to one another. The reader comes to know, and perhaps even finally empathise with, the somewhat unbearable Volker, who appears to be leaving Germany as an attempt at escaping the pain of either the break-up of a romantic relationship or the death of a lover. Just as Volker’s lover is the melancholic absent presence of Adair’s novel, so is Africa, the continent to which Volker is travelling, and Adair leaves the reader “wondering what to do with this story” (161), as she has Freddie put it in *End*.

Works Cited

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_____. *In Tangier We Killed the Blue Parrot*. Jacana, 2004.
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