

## Books

# Marked by the strong and weak

This book is a delicate balancing act seeking the colours between the starkness of black and white

**BIRTHMARK** by Stephen Clingman

Leon de Kock

At one point in *Birthmark*, Stephen Clingman describes himself as “this he that was I, this I that was he”, signalling the gap between experience and narration.

Good memoirs necessarily engage in a play of closeness and distance: narrative perspective alternates between looking out from inside a relatively untroubled child’s view, and looking back again with the more knowing gaze of the adult.

How these proportions of perspective are handled determines the tenor of a memoir: too honeyed a view will lack the acidity of ironic distance, although too much vinegar takes away the sweetness of memory.

Clingman’s voice is distinguished by a quality of composed equipoise. He is a Vivaldi rather than a Shostakovich, and his prose is gently probing in a meditative and thoughtful manner. It makes for enjoyable reading.

Like Coetzee in both *Boyhood* and *Youth*, Clingman uses the present tense continuous, and the third person, to describe himself. Unlike Coetzee, however, he also uses a first-person voice, which he mixes into the narration almost unnoticeably.

Clingman reserves the third person for the dispassionate, dry backward gaze that Coetzee made almost

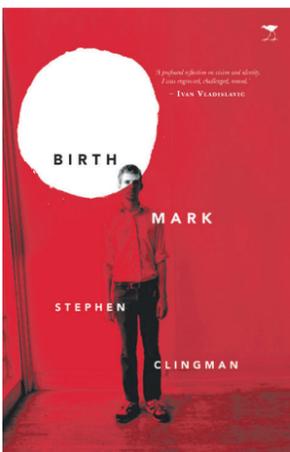
obligatory for writers who came after him, but his first-person voice introduces something that one doesn’t often find in Coetzee: a tone that is affectionate towards and generously accepting of the “I that was he”.

Like Jacob Dlamini in *Native Nostalgia*, Clingman refuses the more standard version of life under apartheid as uniformly one thing or another, in stark chiaroscuro. Instead, he allows earlier versions of himself the full range of his once untroubled joys, recreating in the process a remarkably pungent description of white boyhood in Johannesburg in the 1960s.

It is a time that is replete with the deft deflections of leg-gance shots in school cricket, inside-left soccer wizardry (later to become a political stance), and the miracle of an aquamarine pool at the Oyster Box hotel in Umhlanga, to name a few examples. The rendering of a near-perfect Southern African world in pre-puberty life on the Highveld is hauntingly evocative.

Clingman’s is a measured writing style that readers of his other works, among them the standard-setting critical study, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History From the Inside*, and *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*, will readily recognise.

Here, the oscillation of “I” and “he” narration parallels the shifts from the intimate to the ineluctable, heady absorption in the moment becoming the steadier backward gaze. For example, it is in the third person that



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

the narrator describes his mortification, as a boy, at his father’s fumbling subterfuges in conducting a love affair that excludes his mother: “Cold anger arises within the boy.” The father is given short shrift. Near the end of the book, however, the boyman identifies his father’s corpse in ceremonial Jewish fashion, and reflects, in the first person: “There was a beauty, an inner clarity my father had developed in older age.”

Such undulations of locution, and the Blakean reintegration of the contraries so brought into view, serve as a kind of thematic signature.

The “birthmark” of the title refers to what would colloquially be called a beauty spot under the very young Clingman’s right eye. The boy’s parents worry about the mark, which “looks like nothing so much as a black eye”. After anxious consultation with doctors in the extended

family, the parents place their son in the hands of a Johannesburg cosmetic surgeon who is famous for reconstructive surgery on military burn victims.

This physician, one Dr P, messes up the operation, damaging the boy’s right eye in the process. Instead of disappearing, the birthmark grows back: “It was not quite the same, however — not the same beautiful black with clear outlines and undamaged lids. Now the lower lid under my right eye was bumpy, raised in parts, tear ducts damaged, with eyelashes turned inwards in the near corner, to cause me trouble forever.”

Clingman uses his bodily mark as a stylistic motif to complex and contemplative effect, giving form to it in modes of expression that are, by turns, experiential, objective and epigrammatic. The following early sequence is key: “Consciously or unconsciously, I look up as the surgeon approaches. I see the knife, the sharp steel coming towards and seemingly into my eye. I cannot shout, I cannot scream, I cannot turn away. Left eye turns inward, horrified but also transfixed by what it sees. Right eye does anything to veer away, to look away from what is coming, turning outwards towards something, anything in the distance. The scream is inside.”

And so the book conducts a subtext of meta-commentary on the intricacies of looking and seeing that is more than mere figurative fancy or John Berger-type theory but based on the lived experience of being looked at as a marked person.

Clingman learns early on, as we read in a line of “he” narration, that “his eye is the great unsaid, unsayable in some ways”, and so “here, in his early life begins a daily lesson between appearance and reality, surface and depth, silence and speech”.

The boy persona quickly picks up that, “when people talk, gesture as well as language must be decoded, sound and tone are as important as

words”, and it is therefore “no accident that his underlying quest will be for depth, for meanings below the surface, for his mark is the very emblem of how surface misleads”.

In addition, it is “no accident that he has an excessively strong feeling for justice, especially in personal terms, and for time, which, if you are patient — and you have to be — will reveal the truth”.

Clingman eventually becomes a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst after a Wits BA Hons in the stormy 1970s and an Oxford PhD. In later life, in the United States, he visits an eye doctor who reveals to him that his physical vision has existed at the cost of huge stress on the “visual architecture” of his mind.

The specialist tells him that his ailment, variable vision, owes its existence to the left eye being stronger than the right, and Clingman embarks on a long programme of exercises to restore less troubled stereoscopic vision.

True to his inner writer, Clingman is “tempted by allegory”. If the physician is right, “then weakness and strength are not opposites but exist in a knot of mutually defined intricacy ... Could I not see my family in that way? And what about South Africa itself? Who was strong, who was weak in that tangle?”

Such genial probing is a quality of thoughtfulness that is woven into being, behind the scenes, despite its placid appearance. This process is analogous to the strenuous effort needed, behind the eyes, to make the world appear in stereo. And so the mark, the injury, produces the artist, a writer whose quest is to rebalance what enters the sensorium as formless data into a poised vision.

In Clingman’s case, one can only celebrate the reconstituted work of literary art so produced for its subtle, balanced finish, and for the way it recodes familiar terrain as strange and terribly beautiful.

## Harper Lee sets a cat among the mockingbirds

An independent bookshop in the United States is offering refunds to its *Go Set a Watchman* customers, claiming that the work should be viewed as an “academic insight” into Harper Lee’s development as an author, rather than as a “nice summer novel”.

Brilliant Books in Traverse City, Michigan, has said that its “dozens” of customers for *Go Set a Watchman* are owed “refunds and apologies” over the way the novel has been presented. “It is disappointing and frankly shameful to see our noble industry parade and celebrate this as ‘Harper Lee’s new novel,’” the bookseller writes on its website.

“This is pure exploitation of both literary fans and a beloved American classic (which we hope has not been irrevocably tainted). We therefore encourage you to view *Go*

*Set a Watchman* with intellectual curiosity and careful consideration; a rough beginning for a classic, but only that.”

Speaking to the independent publisher and blogger Melville House, Brilliant Books’ owner, Peter Makin, said he decided to offer refunds after speaking to a “loyal paying” customer, who had only recently become aware of the history of *Go Set a Watchman*.

“She was saddened. She explained that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was her favourite book of all time and she had been so looking forward to reading *Go Set a Watchman*, but now she knew it wasn’t the book she had been led to believe it was,” Makin told House.

*Go Set a Watchman* has been a number one bestseller since its release last month, despite a mixed reaction to the novel. The novel-

ist Ursula Le Guin, writing on her blog, found it actually “asks some of the hard questions *To Kill a Mockingbird* evades”.

“I’m glad, now, that *Watchman* was published,” wrote Le Guin. “It hasn’t done any harm to the old woman, and I hope it’s given her pleasure. And it redeems the young woman who wrote this book, who wanted to tell some truths about the Southern society that lies to itself so much.”

“She went up North to tell the story, probably thinking she would be free to tell it there.”

“But she was coaxed or tempted into telling the simplistic, exculpatory lies about it that the North cherishes so much. The white North, that is. And a good part of the white South too, I guess.” — *Alison Flood* © Guardian News & Media 2015