

A Tree for the Birds.

Vernon R. L. Head.

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Vernon Head's novel *A Tree for the Birds* (2018) focuses on the childhood and adolescence of a young boy, Chrisnelt Malotika, in a city in West Africa. The most significant event for the protagonist is the sudden death of his close childhood friend, who is killed when lightning strikes a tree they are both climbing. This leaves an indelible mark on the young protagonist. His emotional state declines and he develops an almost feverish obsession with both reading books and growing a new tree in his garden. The young protagonist believes that a new tree will bring his lost friend back to him. His investment in the anthropomorphic sentience of the birds and of inanimate objects such as rocks are powerfully demonstrative of a desperate search for meaning in a world bereft. The character comes to exhibit what might be called a certain form of madness. The first four chapters of the book create a simultaneous sense of both urgency and purposelessness and are certainly the strongest part of the novel. At its best, the novel offers a searing and devastating account of the effects of trauma and unbearable loss on a young child.

Over the course of the novel, however, the protagonist's obsession with growing a tree intensifies and becomes a rather uninspired and belaboured thread that links together a series of events and nominal characters. These events—which might otherwise be called vignettes if only they were not so repetitive and wearisome for the reader—include a journey alongside the tropical figure of a wise sage through the forest in search for a fabled tree, unfocused interactions with the Japanese neighbours, and didactic conversations with an Icelandic internet salesman. The protagonist, who has earned the title “Chrisnelt, the Gardener of Dee Dee Street” (184), is later employed by a corrupt religious minister to take care of his garden. It is this employment that results in the protagonist travelling up the Congo River on a boat in order to uproot and transport a massive tree that is revered by a “tribe up the river, in the heart of the forest” (91)—a journey that is itself a rather obvious reworking of Joseph Conrad's figure of Marlow.

The novel is also burdened with overwrought statements that are wrapped in the language of insight but, on reflection, are really thin appropriations of depth. He writes, for example, that “[a] gardener is a privileged person, who fashions bridges of leaves between people” (224), later writing that “[w]e have

always existed as unitary emanations of water and its dust” (330). In another instance, Head writes the following:

It is those very low, old leaves that reveal the past; some hang stained with dust, and the spattering of dry mud, like blood, held long after rain. They are the leaves of memory. They will stay behind, because they belong to the ground; a world that lives further and further away from the sun because of the gift of rain, as the new tree grows onward and upward and becomes sanctified. (257)

While these statements suggest a deep investment in environmentalism, the novel never quite moves this beyond the cliché. This didacticism is similarly evident in the protagonist’s sense of disillusionment about corrupt structures of government and neo-colonial cultural imperialism—which is captured, of course, in the recurring image of the Coca Cola can. This is similarly evident in an exaggerated sense of devastation at seeing a Christmas tree in the city. The protagonist reflects that “[Africa] is a Christmas tree [...] a white, plastic, imported Christmas tree that has replaced a living tree that once burst with the purest green” (emphasis in original) (90). While the novel’s attempts to engage with the intersections between corruption, globalisation and environmentalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century could have been powerfully developed, it is all just too obvious to really gain any traction.

While the lyrical, meandering and unfocused nature of the writing in the novel’s early chapters is effective in giving us insight into the emotional distress of the protagonist, it fails to carry the weight of the rest of the novel. Head’s prose is dense, and contains innumerable figures of speech and an unrestrained lyricism that simply demands too much from its reader over the course of 330 pages. Nouns are inexplicably forced to carry the burden of conceited adjectives, such as when the narrator describes an “extemporaneous tongue” (60), “phantasmal greenness” (63), “loquacious eyes” (200), a “lugubrious shadow” (212), an “epiphanic thought” (222), and even a “propitious hand-spade” (257). In a more extended example of the author’s densely poetic writing, the third-person narrator describes the images that the protagonist has drawn:

The drawings had taken many hours, each one carved with a pen of memories into the green paint, the blue ink tattooing the surface with fine-lined revelations. The astounding detail was botanically accurate, revealing the true nature of each leaf: primary veins, secondary veins, capillary veins, midrib, petiole, stem. The density, size and distribution of stomata were

shown, dotted and patterned, giving the leaves breath. Bristling skeletons, bowing to the world of grace. Leaf after leaf was a tombstone to him, planted in memoriam. Every leaf had been a friend, observed alive, delicate, stretching. Each leaf said ‘Tata?’ on an edge somewhere. Each leaf was framed by radiating lines of verse, telling of an individual life—No’s life. Scratched words, pondered words, like the winding tracks through a forest.” (174–5)

The density of Head’s prose here is representative of much of his writing throughout the novel. Head’s description of the internet is similarly laborious:

The internet, it seemed to Chrisnelt, was the distant future, on the very edge of evolutionary boundaries, illuminating the other side of the walls of perdition: all the way back, long before Belief, walking along a spoor-line, to where everyone began on the plains, at the extremity of the first forests of birds, dancing with the grass. A canopy of pixels, a new roof for the brilliant world of thoughts on the far side of the City. A roof of windows in that red box on the dusty street. A digital sky; the smiling new mask of No. (191)

The novel evidences Head’s obvious mastery of poetry as a genre, but the writing appears impenetrably dense when reproduced in prose form. This is a novel in which nothing of any interest really happens; it fails to move beyond the most basic arrangement of plot and static characters. It is perhaps the author’s acknowledgements at the end of the book that offers the most prescient insight into the unresolved weakness in the novel when he thanks two people “for gently elucidating on the merits of story” (332). But a story itself remains only faintly visible and the loose arrangement of events and characters ultimately serves as a mere backdrop onto which the author projects his densely poetic prose.

Andy Carolin
andyc@uj.ac.za
University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5869-8876>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v.57i2.8418>