

On Norman Rush

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Abstract

Norman Rush, author of *Whites*, *Mating*, and *Mortals*, is one of the finest American writers now working, and, given his achievement, one of the most grievously neglected. The essay below (of which this is the first part) aims to justify the initial claim in the preceding sentence and to explore the reasons for the second. A close examination of Rush's work will make apparent its quality; the neglect of that work may be accounted for by the long gaps between Rush's books, the years he spent living outside America, and his concern with things other than the American experience.

Expatriate Americans have a variety of reactions to the places they live. They may hate those places or love them, be bemused by them or baffled, be amazed, or excited, or bored. Indeed it's not unknown for Americans abroad to experience all of these reactions in an afternoon. If their adoptive countries are well and truly foreign, however (we're not talking about a move from Seattle to Vancouver), these expatriates will never take the countries in which they live for granted; they will never be fish in water. This is no less true, of course, for writers. The countries in which expatriate writers live or have lived almost always become key features in these artists' work. It's hard to imagine Henry James, for example, without a Europe in which to set his Americans adrift, or Paul Bowles without a North Africa to grind his Americans down. And clearly a Henry James novel set in Europe, or a Paul Bowles story set in Morocco, will always be, at least in part about Europe, about Morocco, in a way that a James novel or a Bowles story set in New York need not be about New York.

Thus it is no surprise to find that Norman Rush's three books, *Whites*, *Mating*, and *Mortals*, even as they are about other things too, are about Botswana, a country in which Rush lived for six years while working as a co-director of the Peace Corps operations there. That his novels are not about Americans in America might provide a partial explanation for the fact that, though Rush has received accolades — "Bruns," a story in *Whites*, was included in *Best American Stories 1984*; his novel, *Mating*, won the National Book Award in 1991 — when conversations about our finest authors occur, when names like DeLillo and Franzen and Morrison are flung about with abandon, Rush is seldom, if ever, mentioned. Nothing has changed since Gore Vidal remarked in an essay on Paul Bowles: "Great American writers are supposed not only to live in the greatest country in the world (the

United States for those who came in late), but also to write about the greatest of all human themes: *the American experience*" (Vidal 1995, 431, italics in the original).

Add to Rush's refusal to write parochially American stories and novels the long gaps between his books—five years between *Whites* and *Mating*, twelve between *Mating* and *Mortals*—and it's not surprising that his work floats only sporadically into the consciousness of even that small slice of the public that is passionate about literature. This is unfortunate in part because Rush's stories and novels are filled with information about Botswana, and any information about Botswana—about any part of Africa—will, for most of us, be new knowledge. More important, though—we're talking about art here, not about a work of natural history, or geography, or history, or sociology—Rush has found a way to weave information about Botswana and much else—the range of topics he considers in his work seems unparalleled in modern American fiction—into tapestries that, thanks to their intellectual and aesthetic adventurousness, are a constant delight.

This adventurousness was already evident, if not fully developed, in the stories collected in *Whites*, a book that forms part of what has become his Botswana Trilogy. One doubts that, as the stories were being written and published, Rush conceived of them as forming part of a trilogy, but even so, one encounters in "Bruns," the first story in the collection, many of the qualities which stand out in his later books. "Poor Bruns," the story begins. "They hated him so much it was baroque. But then so is Keteng baroque, everything about it" (Rush 1986, 3), and in these first three sentences we not only meet the characters who will go on to become the narrator of Rush's masterpiece, *Mating*, but also see our first examples of the linguistic filigree that makes Rush's prose consistently interesting: in this snippet the unexpected use of the adjective "baroque" to modify "hate" and the inversion of the standard word order in the last sentence.

Anthropologists, Rush's narrator tells us, are "thick on the ground" in Botswana, and she is of their number (Rush 1986, 4). She is, therefore, a trained, educated, and highly—in *Mating*, at times, obsessively—analytical observer, and in this, as in the quirky originality of her analyses, one sees the first flowering of the type of sensibility Rush enjoys creating. (Indeed, so persistent is this type in Rush's fiction—even, as shall be shown, down to apparently trivial details—that one suspects Rush must be a bit this way himself.) She is also, like her creator, American, and as there is at least a bit of truth in the old saw which has it that one should write about what one knows, this is to be expected. An American can live abroad for six years or sixty, but the expatriate American will still find it easier to get inside an American character's skull than into the cranium of a native.

Rush's protagonist is, as her creator was during his time in Botswana, an outsider, and this serves Rush well: outsiders make the best narrators. Such narrators can, in the hands of an artist as skillful as Rush, be plausibly made to notice for readers details that are telling, to be curious about that which readers will find curious. Rush's narrator is able to

see—her anthropological training comes into play here too—for example, the manner in which the Boers and Africans around her in Ketang stand:

I can't resist mentioning a funny thing about Boer men. Or, rather, let me back into it: there is a thing with black African men called the African Physiological Stance, which mean essentially that men, when they stand around, don't bother to hold their bellies in. It might seem like a funny cultural trait to borrow, but the Boer men picked it up. It doesn't look so bad with the blacks because the men stay pretty skinny, usually. But in whites, especially in Boers, who run to fat anyway, it isn't so enthralling. (Rush 1986, 7)

Tidbits such as this one are not just stuck into Rush's story for the insight or the chuckle they might provide. Rather—Rush is a consummate craftsman—they serve a purpose. The Boers with their bellies sticking out are there to illustrate and in part explain the conflict which will arise between the corpulent Afrikaners of Ketang, and Bruns, "...with his nice flat belly, a real waist, and, face it, a very compact nice little behind" (Rush 1986, 7). Add to his attractive physique—attractive to the Boers' wives and daughters, that is—that he is an absolute pacifist and also that his diet is "whatever is beyond lactovegetarian in strictness" (Rush 1986, 8), and the contrast with the Boers—"Boers and meat go together like piss and porcelain" (Rush 1986, 8)—is complete. And thus in a manner that is text-book perfect Rush has built the bomb that we know will explode before the tale is finished.

But how can it be that Bruns, this mild-mannered pacifist, without compromising his ideals, is not only actively involved in a violent encounter with Deon, the most boorish of the Ketang Boers, but actually comes out—albeit at the cost of his life—on top? This is the crux of Rush's story, and to tell it would be to do him and his readers a disservice. Without spoiling the tale's almost O'Henryesque twist, though, we can note concerns in "Bruns" to which Rush will return again and again. He is willing to introduce into his work, for example, characters such as Bruns, such as Nelson Denoon in *Mating*, such as Samuel Kerekang and Davis Morrell in *Mortals*, who are idealists and utopians and to paint them as other than idiots. Aside from Guy Davenport—an author who couldn't be more different from Rush—it is difficult to name another American fiction writer who takes utopias and utopians seriously.

Rush's concern with utopias, or, more prosaically, with a just world and how we might get there derives in part, no doubt, from the years he spent in Africa, a place where the world's horrors can seem more brutally obvious than elsewhere, and where many in the expatriate community are committed in some way to, by their lights, improving things. Not all of these meliorists, though, are as pure as Bruns, and not all of them are as successful. As we proceed through Rush's stories and novels we see that the utopians Rush paints as most sympathetic are those who are extreme, like Bruns, in their purity, and those who are independent and original in their actions and analyses, such as Denoon, the iconoclast with

whom the narrator mates in *Mating*. Rush has less use, particularly in the early work, for those members of the aid community who plod along doing conventionally good deeds in officially approved ways.

In a story called “Official Americans,” for example, the main character works for the officially sanctioned Agency for International Development. His naïve young wife is pleased with his job because “it kept him in sunny countries and helped the poor” (Rush 1986, 76). When we learn that “she thought of AID as something like the Red Cross” (Rush 1986, 76), we are meant to understand that she is deluded, that things are not that simple. Her husband provides a more jaundiced view. Expatriates, he explains, like living in Africa because:

It isn't our country and we can't help what happens. We can offer people advice and we get paid for it. We get good vacations, we eat off the top of the food chain, we get free housing. Hey! But we're not responsible for what happens if Africa goes to hell, *because we've done our best*... Say we get fifteen percent compliance on birth control here, which is what we do get and which is terrific by Third World standards. O. K., *it's not enough*. But what can we do, we tried. We told them. But *we're too late*. We all know it, but somebody pays us to keep up the good work, so we say fine. (Rush 1986, 104)

And of course one of the reasons that these aid-workers more or less fail (and thus need to employ these sorts of excuses) is that they don't understand the place where they are living. They can neither make the natives into liberal Westerners, nor make themselves into traditional Africans.

Thus, if they are to do anything at all they must step outside of both traditions in the grand manner of Rush's Nelson Denoon. Denoon is not the narrator of *Mating*, but — *Mating* is a love story — like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, he is very much the center of attention. He is, for the intellectual narrator the ultimate alpha-male, one who not only has a wrestler's build — this is the same narrator, remember, who notices Bruns's “very compact nice little behind” (Rush 1986, 7) — but has also succeeded in the intellectual arena to such an extent that, like the radical intellectuals upon whom he appears to be based — think Ivan Illych, Paolo Freire, and especially the South African educator Patrick Van Rensburg — he now tends to denigrate academia and its denizens. Denoon's intellectual might, we feel certain, impresses the narrator — a dedicated intellectual striver — even more than his broad shoulders. (The narrator's name is Karen, but we don't learn this until she makes a cameo appearance in *Mortals*.)

Mating is, like all love stories, driven by desire, and Karen, a bundle of want, is the perfect narrator of such a book. Her desires are always understandable and often laudable. A self-improver, she is intent on lifting herself out of the intellectual and economic poverty in which she was raised, a background epitomized by her grossly overweight, socially inept,

and all around embarrassing mother. Though Karen has come a long way from that background—she is, after all, in Botswana working on a Ph.D. dissertation—since her research appears, after eighteen months in the bush, to be a bust, it is her failures that preoccupy her. “Africa,” she says, “had disappointed me,” and disappointed she retreats to the capital, Gaborone. “...For a disappointee,” she notes, “Gaborone was perfect because you circulate in a medium of others who are disappointed. Nobody uses the word” (Rush 1991, 6).

In the capital she moves among the “white experts,” “anthropologists and anthropologists manqué,” “fugitive white and black politicals,” “spies of all kinds,” and “civil service Brits exceded as decolonization moves ever southward...people forever maladapted to living in England” (Rush 1991, 7), and she commences to take lovers. It is in this section that we begin to know Karen, and the remarks which Rush gives her are so witty, incisive, and informative that although in the scheme of the novel these pages are preparatory, they are also a delight. We learn, for example, about the kinds of disappointment in store for whites in Africa. Karen produces, for example, a comic book primer on basic sanitation in collaboration with a Peace Corps doctor.

...He was overjoyed with the thing and it turned out to be a hit. Batswana were dropping by the office asking for copies. He couldn't believe it. We had to reprint. For a while he was a new man. Then an enemy of his enlightened him. There are public toilets in central Gaborone with no toilet paper in them. The poor make do with whatever kinds of paper they can lay hand on. Actual commercial toilet paper is a luxury commodity. I tried to comfort him with the news that the same thing was happening to the Watchtower publications the Jehovah's Witnesses were being mobbed for in the mall. (Rush 1991, 14)

It is from the last of the lovers she takes in this section of the novel, a British spy, that she learns that Nelson Denoon is in town making a rare visit from the secret closed development project at which he has been laboring for the past eight years. Karen's experiences with Denoon, and with the project to which he has given his life, form the meat of the novel, and will, along with *Mortals*, be discussed in a future installment of this essay.

Works Cited

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