
Book Review:
Of Wild Dogs

Reviewer: *Gerard Ralphs*

Of Wild Dogs

Author: Jane Taylor

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‘The problem of poison’: Murder in the postcolony

As a point of entry in constructing this brief review of Jane Taylor’s first novel *Of Wild Dogs*, I am drawn to a paper she delivered at the Centre for African Studies 1993 conference – ‘Appropriations: New Directions for African Cultural Studies’ – entitled ‘The Poison Pen.’ Here Taylor tracks the “relationship between Enlightenment linguistic philosophy, global mercantilism, colonialism, and nascent nationalism” in terms of the work of at least one Victorian imperial subject – namely, writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.¹ Of Conan Doyle, the inventor of that archetype detective, Sherlock Holmes, Taylor argues:

The unease instituted by the incapacity to know and control the production of meaning and knowledge in the colonies gets figured in the work of the Victorian writer, Conan Doyle, as *the problem of poison*. The powerful organic toxins used in the colonies are associated with alternative systems of intelligence, unreadable representations, political logics which flaunt rationality, and medical and cosmological practices that defy the English imagination.²

In *The Sign of Four*, for example, Taylor writes that “the very presence of poison precipitates a confrontation between cultures.”³ Here she draws attention to, in one particular scene, the manner in which a poisoned “thorn which had been driven or shot with no great force into the scalp” astounds Holmes; and which leads him to an, in light of the above, obvious question: “Is that an English thorn?” To which Watson, Holmes’s assistant, offers a self-assured riposte: “No, it certainly is not.”⁴

It is most interesting, then, in sketching out some imaginary lines of sight between Taylor’s ‘The Poison Pen’ and *Of Wild Dogs*, that subsequent to the initiation of firstly, Dr. James Barry’s post-Batavian “modern health administration” at the Cape Colony in the early nineteenth century, and secondly, the finger-printing systems and surveillance techniques of “Victorian man of science,” Sir Francis Galton, Taylor’s fictional Ewan Christopher – a leftward leaning British journalist – should in 2002 discover himself at Cape Town’s South African Museum (SAM), in hot pursuit of the individual responsible for the inscrutable poisoning of his former lover and museum illustrator and curator, Hannah Viljoen.⁵

Such is the complex, and seemingly contradictory, nature of the topography against which this novel has been conceptualised. However, protagonist Ewan Christopher is not alone in his ardent quest for a solution to the conundrum of Hannah’s sudden death; indeed he is assisted, on the one hand (and who we might additionally call a kind of pseudo-Sherlock Holmes) by the astutely

empathetic and rhetorically gifted Xhosa police investigator Cicero Matyobeni, and on the other, by forensic pathologist and toxicologist, Helena de Villiers – both of whom contribute their local expertise, their contextual speculations, and their knowledge and insights towards cracking the case.

The logic(s) underlying the premeditated murder of Hannah, however, are both intricate and multifarious, and involve an estranged but equally ambitious colleague and ex-lover at the SAM, Michael Pendleton. But Taylor does not stop at that: this central plot-line is complicated further by the introduction of a sub-plot – that of a complex struggle for land in Thoyandou, “a significant stretch of the Limpopo Valley” (p. 90), between its ‘legal’ owner, Jack de Vries of Orange Alluvial mines, and its *in situ* residents, a community of black South Africans represented by one Winston Ramorora. When, in professional collaboration with Hannah, two researchers – Jessica Otterley and Toni Baxandall – conducting fieldwork on a pack of wild dogs on this very tract of land, suggest that the land might carry heritage significance in the order of Zimbabwe’s Mapungubwe or Mpumalanga’s Thulamela, and that perhaps a hasty ‘negotiated settlement’ is not the best way forward for Ramorora and his community, the struggle is intensified resulting in disastrous consequences.

Spatially located in and around Cape Town – between Khayelitsha, the Waterfront and the Company Garden’s – and the Limpopo Province, *Of Wild Dogs* does particularly well, I think, in exploring a ‘tried and tested’ genre (the murder mystery) in the context of what Comaroff and Comaroff have called: the “‘Age of Futilitarianism” wherein postmodern pessimism runs up against the promises of late capitalism.”⁶ In this distinctive sense Taylor dexterously traverses multiple relationships and thematics: the hazy distinctions between fact and fiction, true and false, past and present; issues of memory, identity and psychoanalysis; jealousy and sexual desire; poison, disease and death; the ethics of science and research; land rights and restitution, and so on.

Where the novel and author also succeed is in the ways in which the reader is made aware of the density of each individual character and the multiple stimuli driving his or her actions: in this regard, Taylor’s meticulous descriptions and vast vocabularies act to create the necessary layering and complexity to characters and events. In a kind of psychoanalytic past-present tense, Taylor carefully inserts the links between miniature past events in each of the characters individual life stories, and then, how these events surface – taking form in thoughts, feelings and memories – in the temporal present. At a rather different level of analysis, although in a similar vein, through the Taylor’s self-conscious usage of current (and by current I mean ‘real’) historical events and people – such as the struggle for land in Zimbabwe and Zackie Achmat of the Treatment Action Campaign, amongst others – the reader is perennially unsettled by the blurring of the distinction between fiction and fact: between what is, and then, what is imagined; between ‘history’ and story.

By way of critique, however, at times Taylor’s descriptions and images, which act to create and construe a rather chaotic, despairing and crime-infested “new” South Africa, are all too simplistic and stereotypical; and these might be seen to detract the reader from the complex

nature of the investigative labyrinths through which Ewan, Cicero and Helena travel in resolving the murder(s). Indeed, it is this very ingredient – ‘the problem of poison’ – which lies at the heart of this particular novel, but which, in parts, appears eclipsed by superfluous details and irrelevant inclusions. It might then be argued that Taylor tries to do too much in *Of Wild Dogs*, where, in fact, less (as the aphorism goes) might have meant a good deal more.

There is indeed a popular perception that museums are passive depositories of the past: for collections of dusty artworks, objects or ethnographic displays – importantly, displayed and exhibited to an unenlightened and abstracted ‘public’ – through which scientific, artistic or national historical knowledges about deep histories and times long gone can be found – or, better still, ‘discovered.’ But Taylor’s *Of Wild Dogs* illustrates that, although museums are centrally about a certain exhibitionary, pedagogical and, in some cases, (hard) scientific endeavour, they are also deeply implicated in the workings out of desire, memory, and the politics of the self: “When”, *indeed*, asks Cicero, “does a museum become a scene of murder?” (p. 133)

Against this backdrop, *Of Wild Dogs* taps into some of the most pressing social issues facing South Africa in the post-apartheid era: questions of land, heritage and ownership; crime, corruption and investigation (and then, their corollaries, deviance, deception and trickery); and the nature of the occult economy “welling up behind the civil surfaces of the “new” South Africa.”⁷ And thus makes for an interesting and complex lens through which to view the very often intriguing and uncanny nature of the South African postcolony.

¹ C. J. Taylor, "The Poison Pen", paper presented at the Centre for African Studies conference 'Appropriations: New Directions for African Cultural Studies', University of Cape Town, September 1993, p. 3. Taylor also refers to the life and work of Sir Francis Galton and "his role in establishing finger-printing techniques in metropolitan centres of surveillance." See p. 5.

² Taylor, pp. 4-5.

³ Taylor, p. 7.

⁴ Conan Doyle cited in Taylor, pp. 6-7.

⁵ Taylor, p. 1, 5.

⁶ J.L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, "Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony", in B. K. Axel ed., *From the Margins; Historical Anthropology and its Futures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), p. 267.

⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff, p. 273. In this regard, Ewan reflects in one scene: "Even in Africa there is a social layer, which, in pursuit of disposable capital, will dispose of anyone." See p. 65.