

Book Review

Double Negative

Author: Ivan Vladislavić

Publisher: Umuzi, Cape Town (2011)

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What do you do with half a book? On the back of *Double Negative*, the write-up announces that what you are holding in your hand is only half of the finished product: ‘*Double Negative* was first published in November 2010 in *TJ/Double Negative* as the fictional companion to David Goldblatt’s book of Johannesburg photographs titled *TJ*.’ One can’t shake the suspicion that somehow part of the visual experience of the novel is missing in its text-only format, especially seeing as it’s a novel about two photographers that involves plenty of discussion about the process of representation. I wonder whether Vladislavić might not have considered including some black and white photographs within the text of the novel, a genre similar to that of W. G. Sebald’s texts maybe? Why write a novel as a companion to a collection of photographs and then offer it to the reader without the pictures? Surely the text in conversation with the photographs provides more than the text alone? Or could it be that, as the protagonist remarks, ‘Sometimes photographs annihilate memory; they swallow the available light and cast everything around them into shadow’ (87), and thus on its own, the text creates more space for memory? Indeed, themes such as the recollection of memory, the freezing of the moment in a photograph and the dialogue between images (think Wittgenstein or Sebald’s *Austerlitz*) run throughout the novel and add depth to its blurring of fact and fiction.

Set primarily in Johannesburg, *Double Negative* spans roughly three crucial decades in South African history: the final years of the apartheid regime, the initial awkward years of the hopeful ‘Rainbow Nation’ immediately following the demise of apartheid and finally ‘current’ South Africa, complete with references to blogs, text messaging, facebook and google. These three time periods are reflected in the three-part structure of the book, with sections titled: ‘Available Light’, ‘Dead Letters’ and ‘Small Talk’ (Internal textual references to the first two titles appear a few times within the novel).

The novel covers the development of self-deprecating, sceptical Neville Lister, as he drops out of Wits University, where, his studies had, he offers, ‘awakened a social conscience [...] on which [he] was incapable of acting’ (9). After taking an odd job as a sign painter for a while, he eventually leaves for England to avoid conscription, remarking ‘I’d had enough of apartheid to last me a lifetime’ (86). However, before he leaves, his father persuades him to spend a day with Saul Auerbach, ‘the godfather of documentary photography’ (179), in the hope that watching Auerbach’s patient process will teach his son valuable life lessons. Lister’s day with Auerbach does indeed make a strong impression on him, although he is hesitant to admit it. Even after he’s embarked on a career as a

commercial photographer in London, he is adamant that his work is far removed from the art of Auerbach.

Aside from a scattering of flashbacks, Lister's decade or so in London is sparsely covered in the novel. He refers to this period in his life as an interruption, although on returning to South Africa soon after the fall of apartheid, he struggles to feel at home. The landscape has changed, as have the people. It is his 'longing for the vanished city' (148) behind its ever-rising walls that prompts his collection of wall photographs, whose exhibition initiates the interview that covers most of the third section of the novel. Following from photographing walls, Lister starts to take pictures of 'thresholders' (149), as he calls them: people standing outside their gates and walls. The similarities of these photographs to those of his mentor, Auerbach, are obvious, as are their differences: unlike Auerbach, Lister avoids entering the intimacy people's homes. He is content to photograph their exteriors, their walls and their letterboxes.

Vladislavić's language is, as usual, ironically sarcastic and layered with scepticism. His wry humour seems fitting for a disillusioned protagonist such as Lister. The final section of the book is especially candid, as Lister is interviewed by a young reporter/blogger who throws around current terminology with the abandon of a well-accustomed wordsmith. Irony layers upon irony, until 'they cancel one another out [...] like a double negative' (181), allowing for the deeper, more dangerous, work of self-reflection which lurks behind the laughter.

Double Negative is a compelling, fast-paced read. It succeeds in portraying the shifting identities of Johannesburg and the ways in which its inhabitants are forced to shift and change themselves. Behind the wit and scepticism, Vladislavić sensitively portrays this discomfort with a kind of gruff honesty that I find enticingly disarming.