REVIEW OF MARK BEHR'S KING'S OF THE WATER

'Paradise Lost - or Regained?'
Rob Gaylard

Central to Mark Behr's new novel are issues of identity and belonging and (familiar Behr territory) the complexity of family ties. The protagonist, Michiel Steyn , returns to his family's Free State farm, Paradys, in 2001, after an absence of 15 years. He lives with his partner, Karim, the son of Jewish and Palestinian parents, in Eureka Valley in San Francisco.

His return is precipitated by the death of his mother, 'Ounooi'. The narrative frame is provided by Michiel's brief (about 36-hour) return to bury her and face up to his family. The narrative moves between present and past, between home and exile, between memory and reflection and the challenges and surprises of the 'new' South Africa.

This novel no page-turner: its technique is one of 'slow release', as the reader gradually pieces together the reasons for Michiel's exile from Paradys. These involve betrayals or transgressions of various kinds – the personal, the familial, the social and the political. The immediate reason for his flight is the disgrace of being discovered in flagrente on a beach north of Durban with an Indian naval officer, Govender (this while he is completing his national service).

By the standards of his own (white, Afrikaans-speaking) society, this is simultaneously an offence against God and country (and, of course, family). So in one sense this is the story of Michiel's 'coming out', his discovery and assertion of his identity as a gay man, and of his relationship with his lover, Karim, conducted under the shadow of HIV-AIDs, Somewhat predictably, perhaps, Karim nearly dies and his nursed back to health by Michiel, with the help of the new 'wonder drugs'.

Kings of the Water is also a variation of the farm novel or *plaasroman*. One of its more significant intertexts is Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*. Central among the questions which Michiel (and his family) have to face is: Who inherits the farm? Who has a claim to this piece of land? The novel takes the pulse of contemporary (mainly white) South Africa and reflects debates and dilemmas which are a familiar part of our contemporary discourse.

Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* is also a significant intertext: Michiel reads it in exile in London, and its stark tale of rural dispossession accelerates the (rather belated) development of his political consciousness, and foregrounds a history of rural dispossession. Coetzee's *Disgrace* also features, perhaps more as countertext than intertext. Behr's novel's upbeat vision of adaption, change, acceptance and reconciliation in the new South Africa can be read as a deliberate counterpoint to Coetzee's much bleaker vision.

There is, however, a problem with Behr's depiction of this Free State farming community. 'Ounooi' is a paragon of virtue - generous, empathetic, open-minded, elegant, a source of unconditional love. One wonders how she was able to endure her marriage to 'Oubaas', the unreconstructed racist patriarch of the family.

The community of which the Steyns are a part virtually embrace the 'new' South Africa. This is reflected in the transformed and enlarged Steyn family, which becomes a reflection of the new rainbow nation. The children, who include adopted AIDS orphans, all play happily together. This transformation is signalled by the game on the tube in the farm dam near the novel's climax (whence its title).

Mamparra (consistently misspelt), daughter of a black farmworker (and possible inheritor of the farm), sits next to Michiel in church. She and Lerato (daughter of the faithful family housekeeper, and Ounooi's protege) are almost accepted as family members. Can this really be paradise on earth? Is this simply a utopian vision of what might be (an antidote, perhaps, to a legacy of hatred and violence?). Or is it a form of special pleading?

Is this also a confessional novel? Given the partially autobiographical nature of Behr's fiction, there is a surprising silence at its centre. It doesn't probe very deeply into Michiel's choice to do military service, or into the uncomfortable glimpses of interrogation and torture that this provides. Michiel tells his therapist that as far as military service was concerned, 'there was no decision, no choice . . . it was as easy as breathing'. The same phrase is used later in the novel to refer to his disastrous liaison with Govender.

It is curious that these two defining moments of choice are presented in terms that suggest an involuntary action. Is this an evasion of responsibility (and on whose part)? Readers who anticipate a fictional exploration of the dilemmas, betrayals and evasions which resulted in Behr's own self-imposed exile from South Africa will be disappointed. The facts of his years as a security police informer in the 1980s are well known (as result of his public confession in 1996), and although this does not enter explicitly into the novel, it must inform it at some level.

This is, nevertheless, a multi-faceted novel which speaks to our own ambivalent post-apartheid condition. It is surrounded by a certain amount of hype ('a major international writer'). It may not (as promised on the dust cover) offer new insights into 'the Afrikaner mentality' (whatever that is) but it is a thoughtful exploration of the difficulty of any unambiguous attachment to place or person.