

DANIEL CARNEY AND ZIMBABWE

In the early 1980s, Daniel Carney's fame as a writer of popular thrillers was cresting. Euan Lloyd's film of Carney's second novel, *The Wild Geese*, had just been released, its blood-and-guts depiction of white mercenaries in Africa continuing to delight overgrown teenagers on YouTube to this day. Filmed to much protest in apartheid South Africa, the production was followed in 1985 by the far less successful *Wild Geese II*, based on Carney's novel *The Square Circle*.

If Wilbur Smith, Robert Ludlum and other thriller writers signed to Bantam in the seventies are still read today, then Carney's name and work have disappeared almost completely. In part, this can be explained by his widow's refusal to allow reprints of his work after his death aged 43 in 1987. However, Carney's association with the white minority rule of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) might also be blamed for his obscurity, even if this association now seems as unfair and crass as Rhodesia's political system prior to 1979.

Far from endorsing the Rhodesian regime, Carney's thrillers show an increasing distance from white minority rule while condemning the horrific terrorist acts of Mugabe's ZANU guerillas. Unremarked even at its publication in 1980, his best novel *Under a Raging Sky* hinted at a future with genuine democracy in Zimbabwe, at the same time as noting the dangers of what was, in fact, to ensue: a rushed endorsement of Robert Mugabe's ZANU PF with the tragic consequences we see today.

The son of a British diplomat and a wealthy Canadian mother, Carney was born in Beirut in 1943 and shuttled between Macau, Canada and West African states as a child before being sent to boarding school in England at the age of seven, after which time he rarely saw his parents, other than during summer holidays. His elder sister, renowned activist and writer Erin Pizzey, movingly captured the terror of living in a family for which the label "dysfunctional" might have been minted in her 2001 memoir, "Infernal Child: World Without Love."

Pizzey recounts how their emotionally distant father and vain mother bullied the children, from denying them affection at every turn to being forced to live with their mother's unburied body for five days after her death. Leaving school with no qualifications and profoundly dyslexic, by 1963 the nineteen-year-old Carney had been "signed in" to a position with the British South Africa Police (BSAP) in Southern Rhodesia by his sister, his father having lost all interest in his welfare. Three and a half years in the BSAP, during which time he later claimed never to have arrested anyone, were followed by a brief and unsuccessful stint with Lever Brothers in Salisbury before he set up what became Rhodesia's largest estate agents, Fox and Carney, in 1968. During this time Carney dated a journalist who encouraged him to develop his talent for story-telling, and his first novel, *The Whispering Death*, was published in Rhodesia in 1969.

Carney acquired an agent and his first novel was re-published in South Africa and the UK, with a disastrous film version by German producer Juergen Goslar appearing in 1976. By this time, Carney had married, fathered a child and prospered in business, even as the Rhodesian Bush War intensified and the country's white population began to emigrate in droves. In 1977, Carney decamped to Rhodesia's eastern highlands, living alone in a cottage and combining periods of military service with writing his second book, originally entitled *The Thin White Line*. Renamed *The Wild Geese*, right-wing film producer Euan Lloyd enthusiastically purchased the film rights before the book had found a publisher. Indeed, Carney's agent had rejected the book shortly before Lloyd's acquisition of the title on the grounds of its extreme violence.

Lloyd's ten-million-dollar production featured an all-star cast including Richard Harris, Roger Moore and Richard Burton. Even allowing for the fact that few films manage to capture the intricacies of better-written novels, and that Carney himself would hardly have rated his work alongside that of Conrad, the

film version of *The Wild Geese* is nonetheless an aberration, both dramatically and emotionally, of Carney's book.

Where Lloyds' film squarely casts its gang of white mercenaries as heroes acting for the greater moral good as well as lucre provided by evil banker Sir Edward Matheson, Carney's depiction of the mercenaries in his novel is far darker and more disturbing. For Carney, the white mercenaries are incapable of forming stable relationships, drink heavily and are haunted by their violent pasts: an entire thread of the novel, in which the mercenaries get into fights, abuse women and become incapably drunk, is omitted from the film, as is the love story between mercenary Shaun and Gabby, a girl he meets on furlough in Mozambique. Their relationship fails because Shaun, inured to violence, is incapable of adequately expressing any kind of tenderness. Lloyd's film ends with the murder of Sir Edward Matheson by mercenary leader Alan Faulkener – an ending that enhances Lloyd's depiction of the mercenaries as heroes on the side of right. In savage contrast, Carney's novel ends with a catastrophic crash-landing in Rhodesia's Northern bush which leaves those mercenaries not already dead mortally injured. As if to underline the futility of their mission, Julius Limbani – the deposed African politician they had been sent to rescue from execution – is among the number who lie dying in the stricken aircraft.

Lloyds' film version removes any trace of moral subtlety from *The Wild Geese*, turning it into a monochrome, good-against-evil, shoot-'em-up thriller, something which may explain the film's popularity with an early teenage male audience. True, Lloyds' film includes some of the exchanges about racial politics between mercenary Pieter Coetzee and President Limbani from Carney's novel, but these are so reduced in length and complexity that one of the movie's stars, Hardy Krueger, walked off the production in protest.

At one point Carney (through the character of Limbani) praises the deposed white liberal Prime Minister of Rhodesia, Sir Roy Welensky – yet any debate in the novel is vacuumed from the film’s script by a production team eager for action, action and more action. Such were his frustrations with the film that Krueger later went public to complain that any nuance had been erased from the narrative. It’s the bludgeoning racial insensitivity of Lloyd’s film, coupled with the decision to film in apartheid South Africa, that led to protests and accusations of racism on the film’s release.

Euan Lloyd tried to counter these protests with the gimmick of a pre-screening in Soweto, enabling him to claim, correctly if somewhat disingenuously, that black South African audiences had loved the film – one can only guess how many other world premieres had taken place up to that point in South Africa’s politically repressed townships. For his part, Daniel Carney was no white African Stendhal: the characters in his first two novels are little better than cardboard cut-outs, the homosexual medical orderly Witty in *The Wild Geese* being particularly cliché-ridden and embarrassing. Furthermore, the racial politics expressed in *The Whispering Death* might politely be described as naïve, and indeed Carney’s views are not much more developed in *The Wild Geese* beyond vague claims that “black and white need each other”, and that all are Africans, whatever their colour.

By the late 1970s, the white minority was clearly losing the Rhodesian Bush War. 1976 talks in Geneva between African Nationalists and the Rhodesian government had made it clear a settlement of some description was coming, and that this settlement would include full suffrage for the indigenous population. Rhodesia’s white population experienced net emigration from 1977 onwards, and all but the hardest-line whites of the Rhodesian Front and Rhodesia Action Party accepted that the country’s political settlement needed to change.

By the time he came to write his third novel, 1980’s *Under a Raging Sky*, Carney had matured considerably as a writer. Perhaps the only work of fiction to describe the collapse of Rhodesia and the

birth of Zimbabwe from a white perspective, *Under a Raging Sky* is also the only book written during that time of transition to warn of the impending tragedies of black-on-black violence and intolerance which were to begin in Zimbabwe in the mid-eighties and which continue today.

Nominally a Sisyphean tale about a young immigrant, Patrick Sillitoe, seduced by the promise of riches into following an old prospector on a chase for gold, *Under a Raging Sky* is set against the background of Rhodesia's changing politics in the 1960s and 1970s. It is by some distance the best of the five novels Carney wrote in his lifetime: those that followed (*Macau* and *The Square Circle*) were, to put it charitably, thrillers by numbers, repeating many of the same clichés of thought found in *The Whispering Death* and *The Wild Geese*. One can almost hear the voice of Oscar Dystel, Carney's publisher at Bantam, booming at Carney to drop all this nonsense about politics and plot and meaning and get on with the story after the publication of *Under a Raging Sky*, which remains, for all its qualities, his least well-known book.

Patrick Sillitoe and the Old Man (we never learn his real name) set off on a hunt for a gold reef rumoured to have been left abandoned by a German prospector after the First World War. They are accompanied by a mule and their two black servants, Joseph and Philemon. After various peregrinations, the pair find the mine, exploit the mine, then lose their fortunes to an international mining financier named Maitland, whom Carney depicts as excoriating Rhodesia in public to protect his profits elsewhere in Africa, while continuing to employ proxies to run profitable mining businesses illegally inside that country. Sillitoe and the Old Man find another mine and make more money. Patrick recovers his old love, Judith, and continues to run the mine until the political struggles that form the background to the narrative intervene, and Judith dies from injuries sustained during an attack by ZANU guerillas on the remote farmhouse she shares with Patrick. Before she dies, she gives birth to their son, and the novel

ends with Sillitoe ready to set off once more with the Old Man, his young son perched between them on the seat of his truck.

If Carney's *Wild Geese* evinces something of a censorious morality in its treatment of mercenary gangs (as distinct from the film version), then *Under a Raging Sky* is unremittingly bleak in its view of human struggle. Machinery fails, accidents ruin and maim, mines collapse in on their owners and men continuously cheat each other. Even love offers no succour: Patrick abandons Judith to chase his fortune, she marries someone else, that marriage fails; Patrick has a fleeting relationship with a nurse "on whom I took pity, because I didn't care for her" and – when the lovers are eventually reunited – their love ends in tragedy.

More complex and significantly longer than most thrillers of its day, it's no surprise that *Under a Raging Sky* did not sell well on publication, nor that it is one of only two of his books never to have been made into a film – alongside the eminently forgettable *Macau*. Touted by the blurb writers as "wide, sweeping and glittering with excitement and adventure", it is, instead, as close as genre thrillers can get to literature, if we define literature as stories that carry meaning. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the book's depiction of racial politics in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. If the black population is almost absent from *The Whispering Death* except as a violent cipher, or force to be feared, then the black characters in *Under a Raging Sky* play central roles in the action - and embody the book's message of mutual tolerance and unity between black and white.

Sillitoe's black servant, Philemon, is promoted to Mine Captain but disappears after an argument. When Sillitoe and the Old Man set up their second mine, Philemon returns and reveals to his former master that he had joined the ZANU guerillas in Zambia, only to renounce violence in protest at the guerilla's use of torture against the local black population for political gain. On returning to Sillitoe's mining operations, he arrogates the position of Mine Captain for himself once more, stepping in to the position

of Manager when Sillitoe goes to South Africa with his wife. Eventually, it is Philemon the former guerilla that saves Sillitoe, his wife and their unborn child from an attack by ZANU guerillas on their farm, Philemon's actions leading to his own death even as he saves Sillitoe's white family from being murdered.

More literary readers should prepare their best derisive snort, as I am about to propose a parallel between Daniel Carney's much-derided work and Ovid's *Philemon and Baucis*. In Ovid's tale, Jupiter and Mercury visit a town of sinners and are offered hospitality by the poor and humble Philemon: on revealing themselves, the Gods instruct the old couple to leave the town, as they are about to destroy it as punishment for iniquity. Similarly, in Carney's novel, Philemon foresees "a final conflict, long after we have driven you from our lands... a conflict between black and black, after which this place will be only a wasteland, empty, with nothing but ruins.", then subsequently urges Patrick and Judith to flee: an option they refuse to take.

Far from being a whipping boy for academic critics who delight in pointing out the undoubted arrogance and ignorance of white Rhodesia, Daniel Carney was a writer who foresaw, more than any other of that period, the outcome of the tribal violence which the Shona-born Robert Mugabe was to unleash on his rivals, the Matabele tribe into which Joshua Nkomo was born, shortly after Carney's death.

Nearly forty years after independence, Zimbabwe's GDP per head is lower in real terms than it was in 1980. In contrast to neighbouring Botswana, one of post-colonial Africa's greatest success stories, Zimbabwe's life expectancy, educational attainment and infrastructure are all crumbling. Although Emerson Mnangagwa has promised change, farms and mines continue to be leased to new colonial powers from Asia in exchange for desperately needed roads and hospitals not even being built by Zimbabwean labour. Any political dissent is violently repressed, and the country slouches under the burdens of intermittent power supplies, currency crises and a disintegrated economy.

If Doris Lessing's work was strewn with garlands around the world for depicting the white Rhodesia of the 1940s in all its folly and delusion, and Alexandra Fuller's work captures the experience of growing up in 1970s Rhodesia, then it fell to a now-forgotten thriller writer to tell us what would happen to the country – and how things might have been different if only, in his character Patrick Sillitoe's words, "the sides we had chosen as black and white no longer divided us."