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Anton Ferreira. *Zulu Dog*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002. xi + 195 pp. \$16.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-39223-9.

Reviewed by Cheryl-Ann Michael (Department of English, University of the Western-Cape, South Africa)

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Set in post-apartheid South Africa, *Zulu Dog* by Anton Ferreira tells the story of “the unlikely friendship” which develops between Vusi, an eleven-year-old Zulu boy, and Shirley, the twelve-year-old daughter of a white farmer. The friendship centers around Gillette, an abandoned three-legged puppy that Vusi secretly trains as a hunting dog. The novel attempts to reflect the difficulties that lie in the way of the friendship, but offers an optimistic ending, which portrays some of the characters “trying to overcome the past and build a better future” (p. xi).

Ferreira’s characterization is vivid; he is able to convey a great deal about minor characters in short but telling descriptions. For instance, Shirley’s prejudiced father, Henry Montgomery, is given to us as “shorter than all of his guests but louder than most as he exhorts them to eat, drink, and drink some more” (p. 46). The two children, Vusi and Shirley, are likeable and interesting, each strong-minded, yet also vulnerable. The world of childhood games is, likewise, affectionately drawn as offering moments of intense pleasure. The stark discrepancy between the privilege and wealth of Shirley’s family and the poverty and deprivation of Vusi’s family is also clearly delineated. The novel is set in rural Kwa-Zulu-Natal, and explores the tensions between white landowners and the dispossessed black majority. The city is rarely mentioned, and then only in negative and stereotyped terms: “They have heard stories of how hard the life is there, nightmare tales of how people live in tiny shacks everyone sleeping in the same room, all the shacks ... jammed up against one another.... People in the city are unfriendly and rude, and there are thugs and gangsters everywhere” (p. 164).

While Ferreira takes care to show that in latter-day South Africa, rural life is not untouched by modernity (there are references to taxis, radios, razors), the novel does run the risk, through this overt opposition between the city and the rural areas, of giving the impression that black South Africans live either in mud huts or shacks. Hunting is also portrayed as the natural pursuit of Zulu men, which is hardly the case with a large urban population. Furthermore, the novel appears to suggest that polygamy is an inevitable aspect of Zulu life, rather than a choice made by some Zulus. Nonetheless, Ferreira offers a complex exploration of the difficulties of negotiating cultural difference, through the developing friendship between the children. The following exchange about the question of “witchcraft” is such an instance:

“Is your granny some kind of witch? ”

“She is a sangoma, a medium. She talks to the ancestors, and they talk to her. She is very clever she can cast many, many spells.”

“She used my hair to cast a spell on me? ... My father was right—you are superstitious, you do believe in magic.” (pp. 147-148)

Here the frustration of cultural suspicion and misunderstanding is not given a neat and comforting solution, but remains difficult, tense, and painful. However, given the purpose of the novel, to offer some hope of reconciliation, Ferreira is at pains to point to the potential for understanding which exists in these moments of conflict. This is evident in the children’s discussion of hunting (p. 135), and of polygamy and lobola: “On another day, Shirley might have made more of an effort to see lobola from Vusi’s point of view, and she might have dismissed

her inner revulsion at the concept as the result of the fact that they did not fully understand each other's language. She might have thought of lobola as a kind of dowry, except in reverse" (p. 138). Given the long debilitating history of Western denigration of African culture, the weight of understanding and rapprochement falls upon Shirley. It is noteworthy that the third-person narrator does not suggest that Vusi needs to make more of an effort to understand Shirley's point of view.

Ferreira's commitment to exploring complexities and difficulties, however, is at odds with his need to provide a happy ending. The solutions jar, leaving many questions unanswered. The sudden and surprisingly complete "conversion" of Shirley's father is a case in point. We first meet Henry Montgomery as a determined bigot: "They're backward, Shirley, backward and superstitious. They believe in evil spirits, in magic potions, in witchcraft. They buy women with cattle. We have nothing in common with them" (p. 106).

Ferreira does attempt to show how Vusi and Gillette's rescue of Shirley brings about a change in him. "He has just watched his daughter embrace a black boy. Twenty-four hours ago, if he had seen that happen, he would have lost his temper, he would have hit the boy. Now, though, he doesn't know what to do. The embrace was so heartfelt, so natural, so ... right. He's confused" (p. 182). The confusion here suggests some subtlety in Ferreira's handling of the process of change. Montgomery is confused; he has begun to question the old certainties of his world-

view. Unfortunately, the need for a happy ending clumsily intrudes upon what promised to be a fine analysis of a bigot beginning to question himself. Montgomery is suddenly transformed into a jovial neighbor, delighted to offer jobs and homes: "Of course. Of course! You are welcome to move to my land! Henry beams with joy. The boy has come up with the perfect idea" (p. 187).

The solution itself is problematic, glossing over the very real difficulties of the question of land rights. In attempting to create an ending that symbolizes reconciliation, Ferreira's novel veers dangerously towards the suggestion that white patronage provides an adequate answer. The idea of the sharing of land and profits, a solution that has had some success in post-apartheid South Africa, is not approached in this novel. The experiment is a contentious one, but given such attempts, I cannot help wondering why Ferreira has chosen the more conservative option. Perhaps it might be that this ending was preferred as offering the hope of a gradual change, promised by the new neighborliness. It remains, for me, an ending that forecloses many of the complex issues which the novel otherwise raises. This is Ferreira's first novel, and as such promises further development. His psychological acuteness, and gift for imaginative and lively characterization, if not curtailed by the temptation of neat solutions, offer the possibility of future writing that is both compelling and engaging. I would recommend the novel, but would suggest that should it be read in schools, a discussion of some of the problems it raises would be necessary.

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