

A Human Abattoir

Simon Catterson

Anouar Benmalek (trans. Andrew Riemer)
 THE CHILD OF AN ANCIENT PEOPLE
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AT ONCE EXTRAVAGANT and tightly wrapped, this novel reinforces the view that historical fiction says as much about the present and the future as it does about the past. At the level of history proper, Anouar Benmalek's vision unites three continents that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, are subject to the depredations of European colonialism and domestic tyranny. At the human level, his fiction is preoccupied with the bodily functions and basic needs of survival: things that never change. The broad, impersonal sweep of world history is made up of the infinitesimally small transactions of the primal scene: copulating, defecating, vomiting, bleeding, all driven by the elemental forces of fear and desire, violence and conscience.

Benmalek's three troubled continents are embodied in an unlikely trio of characters, who find themselves on a ship bound for Victoria from the penal colony at New Caledonia in the mid-1870s. Kader is an Arab prince transported for taking part in an uprising by Saharan tribesmen against the French colonial authority. Lislei is an Alsatian woman caught up in the violent upheaval in France during the Paris Commune and exiled as a suspected revolutionary. Completing the accidental trio is Tridarir, a young Aboriginal orphan, who is depicted in the novel as the 'last' indigenous Tasmanian.

Thrown together by injustice, the three outcasts forge a fellowship of the damned. Kader somehow gets on board the ship after he is forced to kill the convict to whom he has been chained for two years. Lislei is accepted on board only in return for working her passage. Tridarir is included as human cargo intended for sale into slavery. After a hellish voyage, the three protagonists arrive at their equally nightmarish destination. Their subsequent fugitive journey, during which a relationship of convenience resolves itself into something approaching a family unit, takes them deep into the heart of the Australian colonial darkness. Along the way, they encounter ignorant, hard-bitten white colonists whose behaviour alternates between callousness and indifference, perhaps not unlike many of their descendants today. Harsh and unremitting, Australia itself has all the hospitable charm

of a landscape by Max Ernst. For the indigenous inhabitants, it is a human abattoir.

In cinematic terms, the almost relentless savagery reminded me of a revisionist costume drama such as Patrice Chéreau's film of *La Reine Margot*. There, a sixteenth-century massacre is depicted in all its bloody ferociousness, in contrast to the earlier — and much less explicit — film version of the Alexandre Dumas novel. Occasionally in *The Child of an Ancient People*, scenes such as the mutiny on board the ship are so overheated that a closer cinematic equivalent might be *Pirates of the Caribbean*, but rhetorical excess in an historical novel is easier to forgive than antiquarian pedantry. As tough as the book is to read at times, it is hard to avoid being dragged along by the sheer momentum of the narrative.

The Child of an Ancient People, the second novel by Algerian-born, French-based Benmalek, was first published in Paris in 2000. Benmalek is one of several overseas writers to set their historical fiction in Australia in recent years: others include Andrew Motion in *Wainwright the Poisoner* (2000), Jane Rogers's *Promised Lands* (1997) and Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000). Benmalek's intervention in the fictional recreation of Australia's past is remarkable, perhaps unique, for its non-Anglocentric, and indeed non-Anglophonic, line of approach.

There are no sympathetic characters, apart from the three protagonists and the Aboriginal characters routinely abused and murdered throughout the narrative. This absence might be considered evidence of a lack of historical balance. But the force and dynamism of the writing offset any real or imputed prejudice of this kind. In Benmalek's conception of historical fiction, there is no sense of a perceived need to engage with the ongoing local debate over facts, statistics and terminology, but rather an urgent need to represent faithfully the blighted lives of the colonised and oppressed, wherever they are.

Is it true that the past is a foreign country? Perhaps, like Columbus discovering America, we only find what we think we already know. Comparing the various ways historical novelists represent the past suggests that the people there do not do things all that differently from us after all.

The Child of an Ancient People is dedicated to the memory of Truganini and her people, the victims of what, Benmalek says, is 'a perfect genocide: its victims forgotten, the murderers free of blame'. Though there is a note of hope in the ending, the novel is evidently intended to register, via the vehicle of historical fiction, a fierce protest on behalf of all the dispossessed and persecuted indigenous peoples of the modern world. And on its own uncompromising terms, it succeeds.