

NON-FICTION/FICTION

Gary Geddes, *Drink the Bitter Root: A Writer's Search for Justice and Redemption in Africa*, Douglas & McIntyre, 2011

Stephen Gauer, *Hold Me Now*, Freehand Books, 2011

Gary Geddes's *Drink the Bitter Root: A Writer's Search for Justice and Redemption in Africa* explores what Geddes identifies as the increasing importance of the perspective offered by those who are weaker. Adopting humanitarian Jean Vanier's attitude that he is finally free in his older years to listen to the voices of the oppressed, Geddes critically examines the concept of justice in the context of contemporary African history, whether describing the slow bureaucratic machinations of the International Criminal Court or the plight of individual Africans. As Nancy, a rape victim in Uganda, says of her attackers: 'Justice? What's that? ...what I wish for [is] restoration. Bring them back, integrate them into our community. They were mostly abducted boys.'

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Geddes acknowledges that he is no expert in African politics. Before leaving Canada, he consults a *Vancouver Sun* correspondent who advises him to 'Keep moving. Don't stand around looking lost and confused. An injured animal is fair game in Africa.' His quick tour of sub-Saharan Africa is precisely what renders Geddes's observations superficial. *Drink the Bitter Root* offers a skillful blend of history, literary criticism, memoir, testimony, and reportorial impressions of that continent. *Bitter Root* is thoughtfully researched and well structured. But its predictable ideology seems designed to fit a literary convention that balances despair with hope. Its many concrete, moving scenes are crafted with care but seem too often presented for effect.

Geddes's motive for exploring the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somaliland, Rwanda, and other troubled areas is murky, beyond his fascination with a disturbing photograph of the 'Somali Affair,' the 1993 Canadian military scandal in which two young peacekeepers stationed in Belet Huen beat to death a local teenager they suspected of robbing the base:

I had with me on my computer the image of Shidane Arone's bludgeoned face, photographed by one of his torturers, the perfect symbol of what the West had been doing to Africa for almost two centuries. That photo would help to clarify my purpose and steel my resolve.

The history of Africa is certainly more complex than this, requiring a wider lens and a more sophisticated set of symbols. There are multiple ways to interpret Western colonialism. Dualistic notions of good and evil have been explored before with predictable conclusions.

Drink the Bitter Root self-consciously adopts the quest motif provided by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, exploiting Africa as a metaphor for Western consumption. Strangely, Geddes seems unaware of his own complicity in this project. Africa is, he writes, 'the only continent, other than Antarctica, I had not visited in my extensive literary travels.' As is often the case with adventure writers, extreme suffering makes titillating reading and confers a special status on the tourist who collects such experiences. For Geddes, attempting to come to terms with the widening gulf between violence and justice, Africa serves as an example of an historical arena for inhumanity, played out continuously, rooted in the abuse of the black population and the dark continent. Yet Western colonialism is not the only antagonist in the story of African history. Arab conquerors aided in the development of the slave trade, and battles between tribal and ethnic groups predate colonial incursions. Geddes only hints at these complexities.

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Toward the end of his memoir, Geddes devotes a large section to describing Somaliland as a place of poets, where a four-hour ode to the camel attracts a sizable audience. This is no doubt meant as a counterpoint to the grueling stories of rape, disfigurement and abuse provided by the subjects he interviews, as if to suggest that such enduring values of liberal humanism redeem the horror of life in sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately the lens is incapable of offering a clear view, and to suggest that 'the arts provided comfort and inspiration to downtrodden spirits,' as Geddes does when asked to give a guest lecture at an African university, is problematic on many levels. He recognizes this when the audience confronts him about the ability of poetry to change society, unable to name a single case to prove his point. It can be patronizing to offer such solace in the midst of terror when one is viewing the situation from the safety of the sidelines. Geddes claims to his audience that all writing is political, and he is right, as his listeners are quick to point out.

Geddes's presentation of African poets, child soldiers, genocide survivors, activists and medical staff provides a human portrait of both destitution and optimism. Although it is compassionate and well-intentioned, beautifully written and engaging, it ultimately can-

not offer satisfying answers to the shifting and arbitrary problems surrounding race relations, moral redemption and social justice.

Hold Me Now, the first novel from Toronto writer Stephen Gauer, also wrestles with the notion of justice in his fictionalized recounting of the murder of Aaron Webster in Vancouver's Stanley Park over a decade ago. Many stories have been told from the victim's perspective, but Gauer's is significant because events are filtered through the compelling point of view of a grieving parent. The media exploitation of the story, the account of the investigation, and the trial and sentencing of the killer all strain the victim's father, Paul Brenner, to a breaking point regarding his convictions about the Canadian legal system. The novel describes Brenner's life both before and throughout the year following his son's murder, with all the stages of grief accentuated. It does not matter that Brenner is a weak person, or that he's a rather dull, middle-aged man, a contract lawyer divorced from a religious ex-wife. He notes that 'He couldn't live with someone who knew him that well. In his new relationships he could present himself in a more controlled way, offer the best of himself and usually hide the worst.' If anything, such qualities make him more human and appealing. He is devoted to his mother, who lives in an assisted-living facility, and is a dutiful if somewhat distant parent to his daughter Elizabeth in New York and to his son David, whom he meets regularly for dinner in Vancouver. That he recognizes his ignorance and his stereotyping makes it easy for the reader to forgive him:

Did the gay people seem brighter and more expressive? Perhaps.... To say that gay people had certain common qualities didn't mean you were prejudiced. But how could you hold an intelligent opinion about something you knew so little about? You needed to educate yourself first. But how?

When David is murdered by a group of gay-bashing teenagers in Stanley Park shortly after one of these dinners, Brenner's life is irrevocably altered. This opening scene is well written, poignant: the reader knows, but neither man does, that the simple meal together, however fraught with normal family tension, can never be replicated and will acquire an almost luminous quality in Brenner's memory. The intergenerational conflict, the background music that drowns their conversation, and the hit-and-miss quality of their connection become emblematic of Brenner's misunderstanding of his son and of his inability to relate to him, even though he claims to accept David's homosexuality. The real subject of the book is the thawing of Paul Brenner's heart. Gauer describes Brenner's descent into self-destruct-

tiveness with detailed accuracy: already struggling with alcoholism, after David's death he drinks even more heavily, alienates his girlfriend, trails David's killer after the trial and, seeking oblivion, engages in increasingly perilous behaviour with prostitutes. He struggles with intimacy and with trying to understand his son's risky lifestyle; ironically these traits link him more with his son than he is aware.

The detached tone of the novel is unrelenting, and while it accurately reflects Brenner's numbness, the lack of tonal variety makes it difficult for the reader to engage with his experiences. Anyone who remembers the powerful shock of Aaron Webster's death would want to identify with the pain Brenner feels, especially as a parent, and the dramatic content of the novel almost guarantees reader sympathy with the subject. Yet the scenes, however detailed and realistic, are rendered in a formalized and rigid manner that makes this challenging. Gauer's style also inhibits our connection with the genuine catharsis that Brenner experiences when he gives up drinking, develops an increasingly tender relationship with his ailing mother, and begins to acknowledge the depth of his feelings, particularly in relation to his remaining child, Elizabeth.

Brenner has a literal near-death drowning experience, and his spiritual rebirth signifies his ability to connect with others at last. This comes as a dramatic relief to the reader after the repetitive pain of Brenner's detachment and despair that is palpable in all of his relationships and drives away all those who want to support him. Brenner's abandoning of the notion of legal justice in favour of forgiveness and understanding is persuasive; it is a slow and heart-rending, but profoundly meaningful, process. He learns that there is no satisfaction in vengeance when he finally confronts David's killer and recognizes that he is yet one more misunderstood and alienated young man. The book is worth reading at a time when our culture is wrestling with ways to eliminate bullying and increase tolerance for gays and lesbians. It is an accurate and devastating account of one man's grief and recovery in the face of terrible tragedy, and a portrayal of the necessary path toward compassion.

— *Liza Potvin*