Ungovernable violence

David Papineau

RIAN MALAN My Traitor's Heart 349pp. Bodley Head. £14.95. 0.703/33440

MALAN WILLIERS White Tribe Dreaming 420pp. Penguin. Paperback. £5.99. 0.1405/2970

When Rian Malan was growing up in Johannesburg in the 1960s, any visitor from overseas was a potential threat to the security of the regime. A decade later, when Malan gave up his job as a junior crime reporter and went to work on a freelance magazine, the roles ironically reversed. South African politics had come into fashion, and émigrés like Malan and Gerrit Louw had to be on the lookout for avowedly left-wing journalists. Except, Malan discovered, his American hosts had a limited appetite for his dinner-table stories. They didn't want their simple picture of South Africa messed up by his complicated tales of Afrikaner history and black revolution. To them, Malan decided to return home and write a book about his country instead.

The result is a book that is often distressing, as it is written in an awareness of its own images of violence to undermine any easy assumptions about South Africa. Malan stages scenes against the familiar, military background with snippets of family history and ironic stories of his Marxist school-days band. But when he gives his days as a young crime reporter, he begins to fill in the details behind the murders he wrote up as minor items to his mother. The book forms the pattern for the rest of the book. On his return to South Africa, Malan seeks out murdered stories of another kind. He seeks out black, South African, political, partisan and downright mindless - and aims to lay bare the essence of South Africa through the moral bankruptcy of those who will fail to agree that this adds up to a balanced picture. But it is certain one that will unsettle the Californians.

Malan's Traitor's Heart would be worth while for the personal early reports from South Africa that is part of his reportage from South Africa, and well-considered fiction, it is little writing which conveys the specific mixture of bohemian seriousness which one must use to get "hip" young whites in an affair society of the late 1970s to take him seriously. Malan explains what it is like to hang out in black bars, to seek out fragile inter-racial friendships, to smoke dagga (cannabis) in the South African student movement, to put it to "joll" - pronounced "jawi" and meanin any improper behaviour of a pleasure seeking white. As a musical universe of distinctive South African voice with which to relate his inventions of the imagination; artistic, energetic, almost without the limitations of bohemian conventionalism. Some readers will no doubt have no initial suspicions when Malan turns his narrative power at the killing. South Africa does not have some horrific crime statistics: 10,000 murders a year, one for every 3,500 people. (By comparison, for example, a murder rate for every 100,000 people, and England one for every 70,000.) But for most writers the natural readers' resistance to the crime itself, and to talk instead about the overcrowding, the soldier and the insecurity of the townships where the black masses are confined. By homing in on the killings, Malan invites charges of apoloitical sensationalism - ignoring the social whole for the hard detail.

But such doubts underwhelm Malan. As in Traitor's Heart, the people are in the narratives: homespun homelife, the effect of Malan's awful details is to heighten the reality of the image of violence. It is a book that understands the kind of lives in which such deaths can happen. When Malan tells us about Dennis Mabuza, the fanatical political youth who gets beaten to death as a sideshow at an Afrikaner redneck barbecue, or about Simon the Zulu Hammanker, the deranged serial killer haunted by his incestuous tribal ancestry, the militant mine worker from the Transkei who persuades him that the traditional Xhosa warrior's battle medicine will protect them from the bullets of the riot police, we learn more about their colossus and their milieu than we would from dozens of dispassionate surveys.

Some of Malan's stories have a more direct political edge. Samuel Mope lives in a three-bedroom township house, owns a television set and a second-hand Renault, and is a member of the Zionist Christian Church. In 1985 his thirteen-year-old son was killed on his way to church by a marauding police party. A constant was tried for culpable homici- dy but acquitted. The police refused requests to stay away from the family, and the funeral feast by firing off the back of their Land Rover.

He was such a decent man, that Samuel Mope, so stern, moral, law-abiding and God-fearing. An Un- closeted to speak plainly. He had told the African The Anba the Botha government thanked God for its in a letter to the President, one of the most eloquent as a donkey and endly respectfully of white authority. I don't mean to belittle him. Samuel Mope was a man of immense dignity and great restraint. His story unfolded in a grave and imperial manner until the very end, when his face suddenly twisted and tears filled his eyes and he said, Ek kell volk. I am black and I have no power; I have left all.

Samuel Mope's son was killed because the police mistook him for a militant young "com- rade". Malan's account of the real comrades makes chilling reading. Like most of them, the youngsters in the township forms gang. One bunch are called the Zim-zims, because they follow Biko and Black Consciousness and talk of capitalism, socialism, colonialism and other isms. Their opponents follow Mandela, and are called the Warazan, the war份 "where-where", and derived from the ANC's supposed inability to locate the whites as the true enemy. But these gangs never play chil- dren's games. Malan investigates the story of Fana Mhlongo, the young mascot of the local Zim-zim, who was nicknamed "Goldie" because he was small, short and fat, like a stubb- nosed revolver. When Fana gets kidnapped by the Warazan, it is just not for the afternoon.

Fana's corpse was found on one of Soweto's golf courses under a layer of grass and earth. They had used a 22-calibre bullet to dispatch him. There were tiny cuts on his head and on the soles of his feet. His father said he had been put in a bullet in his temple, dumped his body and built a fire on top of it. He was fourteen years old. The body was dissected.

The final section of Malan's book is set in Minsa, a district of the so-called Kwazulu "homeland". Misinga tests even Malan's power of imagination. Like many other black South Africans, Misinga was first declared a native reservation in the middle of the nineteenth century. Today, it is blackened, eroded, divided up into a valley strewn with broken hills, mud huts and so-called residences. Misinga periodically erupts into violence, as the Xhosa seek to persevere some vendetta whose origin is obscure even to the oldest of the participants. And nowadays these vendettas are as likely to be conducted with AK-47s as traditional assegai, for Misinga is also the home of some of South Africa's leading cannabis barons. The heroes of the book, the people of Akaka are the victim of local police and Creina Alicko, an idealistic white couple who set up a peasant farming demonstration project, to the police of the rural slum. The story of their struggles is often inspiring, but there is a sad inevitability about the inevitable hope of the project's success. In an eventual death, caught in the crossfire of yet another vicious clan war. Creina Alicko lives on in Minsa, a sym- bol perhaps of the need to continue living in the face of betrayal and defeat.

Malan says that at one time he had intended writing a different book: to explore the history of the Afrikaner people through the history of his family. If he had, he would have been pre-empted by Marcy de Villiers's White Tribe Dreaming, first published in 1986, and now reissued in paperback. De Villiers, Malan can trace his Huguenot ancestry back to the beginnings of the Afrikaners, and his book interlaces family histories with the broader movements of South African history. The two authors' families fit in and out of each other's pages. There are several Malans in de Villiers's history, culmi- nating in Daniel François Malan, who led the National Party to power in 1948, and General de Villiers, the current beleaguered Minister of Defence. And de Villiers's own father, René, figures in Malan's book, as the author of the liberal newspaper that congratulates Malan's graduating class of trainee journalists.

Malan's book also interweaves the pleasures of greater understanding the Afrikaners. In de Villiers' pages we learn that there is much to admire in Afrikaner history. The pioneers who pushed further and further into the interior to provide myths of bravery and adventure as well as the simple lives of the farmsteads of the West. And the commando skills which things those pioneers handed down won the respect of their grandchildren pitted against them imperial British in the Boer War. Even after the Boer War the Afrikaner leader- ship produced men of vision and liberal in- clinations, such as Jan Smuts and J. H. Hof- meyer. It is true, that in relating to the black Afrikaners of South Africa, the Afrikaners had been at best paternalistic, at worst guilty of brutality and mass murder. But until the mid- 1930s of this century, this left them in step with white conquerors the world over. It was only as South Africa industrialized, and the mass of working-class Afrikaners became increasingly aware of the isolationism and biblical fundamentalism which had always charac- terized Afrikaner thinking, combined with eco- nomic problems, that may create the monstrous anomaly of modern apartheid.

These books have both been overtaken by events. Despite their concern to explain the Afrikaners, neither de Villiers nor Malan antici- pates recent developments, and their limited views of the foreign relations, with de Villiers invoking the Vorsttrekker, eternal desire to find a better place, and Malan regarding the Afrikaners as one of the few true Afrikaner home country, and in the Afrikaners, as the increasingly urban and affluent middle class ties of the enormous eco- nomic and ideological, as the political poor whites, and prepares to abandon them to the rigours of non-racial competition. An in- evitable counter will be a further acceleration in black urbanization, as the trickel-down of economic opportunity sucks more and more families out of the reserves and into the townships. This is what is driving the new Afri- kaner leadership into alliance with the ANC, as the only hope for establishing some kind of legitimate authority in these already ungovern- able conurbations. It remains to be seen whether the Afrikaner and the coloureds will still carry any weight with the hardened veterans of the years of Zim and Warana warfare.