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Matthew Thompson - *Running with the Blood God*, Sydney: Picador, 2013, ISBN: 9781405040389

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This is an odd book, part gonzo 'down 'n' dirty', part analysis of some of the world's woes. Thompson set out to chase to mavericks "in order to touch the freedom that they carry in themselves and spark in others" (xiii). His theme established early, and repeated, is that life can become stagnant and the imagination sapped, and that there are those who take up arms or otherwise confront dictators, in paces such as religion-wracked Iran, the sad Philippines, and Serbia with its deep sectarian schisms. For good measure he revisits the land of his birth, the U.S., to dig into counter-culture (or, perhaps, over-the-counter culture). So off we go, helter-skelter, initially chasing high-voltage liberation in Iran, into the security crackdown of 2009, into a nation with estimated 90,000-militia members who hunt women for dress code breaches and raid parties to arrest drinkers, when not beating or killing protestors.

As he penetrates a resistance movement, Thompson does more than standard reporting to give the reader a jolt of the fear in his encounters, such as with a non-political young man who had joined a night protest for 'fun' only to be smashed around the head by motorcycle militia, locked in a car boot, held in a police station for two days, then blindfolded and interrogated in a prison for three weeks (17). When Thompson meets this victim, who refuses to be one, he is awaiting arrest and a certain two years' jail.

This information is disclosed in a series of conversations reported by Thompson. A number of such conversations are in his book, even when the author says he was drunk or stoned, yet we are asked to accept allegedly verbatim reconstruction. This curiosity aside, his encounters bring home the ache of reality in the nations he visits. Simple, compelling stuff, such as being told by a friend to get rid of anything incriminating and have Thompson's wife change the passwords of all of Thompson's email accounts before he goes to the airport to leave Tehran. The new passwords would be impossible for him to guess, so that if he were arrested security could not learn anything. That of course, is all very well, except that right after this, his friend hurls his SUV straight towards the major security prison and torture centre, the 'Hotel Evin', pulling a U-turn at speed before a guard in the driveway.

No time to pause before our hero is off to see the worship of the blood god. The gutters run with the blood of tens of thousands of slaughtered sheep, killed in the streets and presented with rice to the many hundreds of thousands of Shiites who pack a city, shuffling, bellowing and stamping, (he says stomping), past Thompson's hotel room in what he calls a carnival of grief.

Such scenes appear on our TVs, but it is utterly different to be there. Thompson is pushed into a line, putting his right foot forward to stamp, then shuffle with the left, on the beat up go huge flags red for blood, white for sacrifice, black for mourning and Islamic green, apparently the traditional colour of Mohammed's family. Another short thrust is followed by a thump of hands on chest.

Thompson is even scarily taken into a mosque, a round-domed furnace of heat full of hundreds of boys and men stripped to waist dancing 'beyond the most narco-assisted extremes of any psycho-rocker I've ever seen'. This is a mosque of the Basijis, a terrifying death squad. Outsiders are not permitted.

Penetrating such a place seems to be the author's specialty, for after Iran he's off on a successful hunt for anti-government guerrillas in the Philippines. He has stepped over babies sleeping in cardboard filth with their mothers on the street, eventually finding his way to the New People's Army and another sort of reality. It is one where people talk of the cruelty of the Japanese who killed many Filipinos as the US fought to regain its former colony, earlier wrested from Spain.

However, just as some clarity seems to appear about why the fighting continues, there are complexities to consider. These include claims that the left-wing guerrillas, who claim allegiance to Marxism and Leninism, are actually working with the rich, being paid to protect mining projects that turn peasants off their land.

His adventures include being mugged by street kids before joining guerrillas in the bush. It is powerful and speedy stuff and before long we are in the almost unbelievably bitter world of Serbia and Kosovo. What more do we need to know about this conflict?

The author has an ability to make it seep into one's mind, as he yet again goes where he shouldn't, traveling with Serbs into Albania, where the outsiders see burnt churches and desecrated cemeteries. The outrage is as volatile as their bigotry, which makes standard Australian racism seem pretty tame:

“ Crouching up at the front of the bus gives a better view, and the depressed-temple fellow joins me.”

“Look at him,” he says, gesturing an old man wearing what appears to be a red fez. “Look how ugly he is. Can you even call him human?” Then a fair-haired man “Look at that! Look how he squints and his face squeezes like an asshole. On all of the earth there is not an uglier race of people ...” A pregnant woman appears: “She is breeding more of these monsters. They are hideous, badly formed things that must disgust all normal people ... not human like you and me ...”

The speaker is a lad with a deformed head, a bowl haircut that seems his mother cut it on a bad day, a slumped posture, double chin and a fat belly (221). ”

The far-off nightmare of Yugoslavia, with its genocidal president Slobodan Milosevic ultimately hauled off to die while on trial at The Hague, looms up during a strange ceremony commemorating a 600-year-old battle. At its end Thompson falls in with a Serb who says,

“ “Australia? Okay, so unless you are an Aborigine you have no old stories.” “I’m not an Aborigine and that’s right, and I don’t have any old stories,” replies Thompson. “I’m blank, empty.” ”

This is a fine piece of avoidance, for he does have so many stories, especially as memory surges and he finds that ‘the human spirit is aspirated [fine word] and invigorated when it shakes and wakes from its limiting little dream of routine and control in which we spend way too much of our lives. Predictable living is both metronome [sic] and amnesiac, counting down our days and putting into hibernation our knowledge of who we rally are, knowledge that lurks in our blood waiting for those incandescent moments when we assert ourselves come what may.” (356).

Thompson, part-time fire-fighter, broken nose, adventurer, a writer and teacher with a doctorate in literary journalism, asserts himself in these disparate places and emerges with fine stories, his racy accounts sometimes slowed by unleavened background and potted histories. Considering the many turgid and sterile books that purport to look at the world and its woes, we should be grateful that there is an author with enough sense of madness and mission to go into dangerous, beyond control places and report back to us. What he finds is worth knowing, despite the dust jacket blurb describing an “incredible work of reportage with the pulse of a thriller” being more overblown than Thompson's worst prose. Such as

“ ‘... outdoor recreation’ – from running to rock climbing – seems to serve this [accepting risk and overcoming limitations] up on a platter, but so often those pursuits devolve into fetishist consumption, with adherents slavishly putting the swishiest equipment and hippest venues ahead of the raw essence of activity ...’ (284). ”

His evidence? A new friend has the latest in high-tech ‘barefoot’ running shoes, while Thompson owns unused telescopes and home-brewing gear and *Ulysses* and *The Satanic Verses* (he names the authors) in bookshelves of unread tomes. There seems no link here. These are among his musings among the stoners and free-living folk of his birthplace, Portland, Oregon, is a let down after the adrenaline rush of repression, guerrilla warfare and mad religiosity and seems somewhat indulgent. The best of *Running with the Blood God* is, however, mostly

pacey, enjoyable and informative. I look forward to him reporting from, say, South Sudan, Yemen and Syria.

About the reviewer

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