Constructed as a historical novel, this is neither fish nor fowl

**BLOOD ON THE PATH**

Harvey Tyson
Springbok Press

**BLOOD on the Path** is a panoramic historical novel set in late 19th and early 20th century South Africa. The historical novel is a difficult genre, and on this showing Harvey Tyson, a veteran South African journalist, has not mastered it, with the result that this lengthy book is neither fish nor fowl.

He struggles throughout with the necessary balance between fiction and history, and history wins hands down. At the end of the book, in a perfunctory attempt at meta-narrative, a minor character utters, "Don't you think he wrote about the Green Face for one reason and one reason only? To get his readers interested ... in all this historical stuff?" (p 542).

The novel tells the story of Andrew Whitfield, born in Cape Town in the late 1860s to a white father and a Muslim mother. As a young teenager, in 1883, Whitfield kills a leopard with his bare hands and sees his father eaten by a shark while hunting whales in False Bay.

Soon afterwards, he leaves with his half-brother Yusuf to seek his fortune in the diamondfields of Kimberley. They carry with them the Green Face, a jade carving and family heirloom. During the journey the brothers fall out, and after a fight, Yusuf leaves Andrew for dead in the Karoo, and takes Green Face. Andrew is rescued by a San hunter called /Xam, and they live together in the bush for a time.

From Kimberley, Whitfield moves on to Johannesburg, where at the age of 19 he finds work as a stockbroker's messenger. Eventually Whitfield becomes a journalist, and lover of Mary Grant, an early feminist. At the end of the book, Mary dies in an air crash, but not before revealing Whitfield is the father of her son, killed in World War 1, who plays no role whatsoever in the narrative.

Although Whitfield is a witness, he is not often a participant in important South African events. Tyson wants his hero to be an "outsider, a neutral observer" (p 460) rather than an active protagonist.

Tyson is much more interested in the historical context of his novel than in the story, and his fictional characters spend much of their time standing around while the author analyses the events that they -- and we -- are watching.

For example, Andrew's half-brother, Yusuf, is angered by the introduction of racial segregation in Kalk Bay schools. But rather than following a novelist's instinct and actually showing us injustice -- how Yusuf's children were affected, for example -- Tyson prefers simply to lecture us about the unfairness of segregation.

The plot summary fails utterly to convey the flavour of this unfocused novel, weighed down with lengthy, didactic digressions into historical events. The fiction is static, the viewpoint shifts constantly and the narrative is buried in superfluous historical detail: there is a map, a bibliography, a set of footnotes, a timeline and even an index, and Tyson quotes extensively from letters.

Good historical fiction can sometimes tell us things about the past that "factual history" cannot, because it allows the narrative to move beyond what has merely been documented, to the emotional truth of history. Tyson shows little sign of being aware of this: his is a South African history of white rulers and political decisions, not of the oppressed and dispossessed battling to live ordinary lives.

The book is poorly edited. Russian anarchist Petr Kropotkin (1842-1921) becomes Prince Proposition (p 320), British labour leader Keir Hardie (1856-1915) makes a brief appearance as Keri Hardier (p 421), and anachronistically Tyson has a black character talking about his "dompas" (an expression first recorded in about 1958) in a chapter set in 1902 (p 375).

- Colin Darch