



The Broken Word

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An extraordinary poetic sequence that animates and illuminates the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s, eventually becoming a meditation on the inheritance of conflict and its consequences. It is a thrillingly original, profound and lyrical work.

The Broken Word Details

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Sanaa Shaltout says

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Mariam Hamdy says

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Alexander Kosoris says

While I still probably consider poetry the writing form for which I know the least, I'm slowly stepping in and getting some basis of understanding. But let the previous statement context for the following one: I've never encountered anything like *The Broken Word* before. This isn't to say that Foulds necessarily does things that have never been done before, but rather that I will forever compare anything similar to this work, mainly because it was the first of its kind I read, but also because it was so well-written.

The Broken Word is a narrative poem that recounts a young man's experience in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising of the '50s, and his subsequent attempt to re-enter polite English society despite being thoroughly traumatized during his stint there. While there are specifics in the text that very much place the story within that conflict – such as Louis Leakey discussing the G?k?y? taking their oath – the central conceit of trauma coming from atrocities strikes me as being quite adaptable to all manner of conflicts throughout the ages. While this is likely a significant portion of what makes the poem meaningful, the fact that Foulds remains unflinching in his portrayal of the horrors humans felt content inflicting upon their fellow man while staying sympathetic to his troubled protagonist gives *The Broken Word* a great deal of its poignancy.

In short, I found *The Broken Word* concise, chilling, and unique. It's definitely worth the read. (And, you know, it's really short, so you have very few excuses to avoid it.)

Jon says

A narrative poem describing in a series of narrowly focused scenes the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950's and its effect on a young man who has returned to Kenya from school in England. Amazing economy of presentation, unforgettable descriptions, implications that go far beyond what is specifically covered in the poem. Only about 60 pages and can easily be read through (the first time) in an hour. It never went where I expected, and yet it always seemed right. The poem ends (optimistically?) on a note of very precarious happiness, with the young man returned to England to attend university.

Douglas says

Adam Foulds is a writer I've been intrigued by for some time. Recently named Granta's Best Young British Novelists, writer Julian Barnes has said he's "one of the best British writers to emerge in the last decade." After reading this Homeric prose poem, I can see why.

In this sequence of 10 poems written in narrative verse, Tom, a young British man is sent to his family's farm in Kenya during the summer before he enters the university. After arriving, he is thrust into the Mau Mau Uprising, a revolt by the native Kikuyu people that sought to gain independence from British rule in the 1950s. The rebellion is violent, brutal, and eventually disproportionately dominated by the British, as also chronicled in the recent non-fiction account, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*.

I don't know too much about British Imperialism, but by chance, I happened to have also been concurrently reading *Beer in the Snooker Club*, which details a young Egyptian's perspective of conflict with Britain at the same time (1950s). It was utterly fascinating to read these two accounts, one from the perspective of a young Brit (*The Broken Word*) and the other from a victim of Imperialism (*Beer in the Snooker Room*) at the same time.

In this poem, Tom walks through the coffee fields and hears the ritual worship of Ngai, the supreme God of Kikuyu. He's reminded of the liturgical hymns of chapel back in England. The last stanza wakes him from this memory and foreshadows the coming futility of violence.

4) Facing Ngai

Mid-morning after rain.
Mountains flowing rapidly under clouds.
The valley paths a freshened red
with yellow puddles, glittering weeds.

Tom walked between the lines
of coffee for half a mile,
knocking fragments
of water onto his sleeves --
little bubble lenses
that magnified the weave
then broke, darkening in.
He walked to within earshot
and no further.

A surprisingly dull sound of ceremony,
one voice then many voices,
one voice then many voices,
that recalled school chapel
although probably they were spared hymns.
Tom remembered the hymns,

the light, weakly coloured by the windows,
falling on the boys opposite,
standing, opening their mouths;
and the hymn books,
the recurrent pages greyish,
worn hollow like flagstones
with pressure of thumbs, over years,
years of terms, the books staying always
on their dark shelves in the pews.
The days he wanted to stay
all day alone in the pretty, scholarly chapel.

And then over the voices,
another sound.
Faintly, from behind the house,
Kate practising with a pistol,
its faint, dry thwacks
a fly butting against a window pane.

The grand build of these poems left me in awe. The last poem (10) was my favorite. In this poem, Tom returns and settles into university life, and he's urged (society, family, and a personal desire to conform) to forget his experiences in Kenya and carry on with life as if nothing happened. He clearly has what we now call PTSD. To all around him, he's a typical young man, but inside he's scarred and decomposing. His passion, once characterized by restraint and innocence, now harbors aggression and a subtle viciousness.

This is an excellent narrative poetry collection that is easy to understand, powerful in scope, and beautifully composed.

Gilgamesh Nabeel says

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Courtney Johnston says

I was blown away by this slim little book. I haven't read any verse fiction since having a Dorothy Porter crush in my first year at uni, and now I want more.

Tom is an English teenager, returning to the family farm in Kenya for summer between finishing school and going up to university. He returns to the beginning of the Mau Mau uprising, as Kikuyu who were dispossessed of their land by British settlers stage guerilla attacks on British families and loyalist Kikuyu. In retaliation and out of fear the British set up detainment camps where most of the Kikuyu population is eventually interred. The uprising sets the stage for Kenyan independence in 1963, but not until after the loss of thousands of lives and hideous brutality on both sides.

Tom is sucked into this maelstrom in the most horrible way - and behaves hideously, and comes to an ambiguous end. Telling his story would ruin this experience for anyone, and I do so want more people to read this book.

Foulds's writing is like a set of forensic photos, picking out the details that stand for a complex story. You can imagine so much out of these 60 pages, that you wonder why most novels are 200+ pages long. Perhaps that imagination is enhanced as a New Zealander, living in a country with its own uncomfortable and occasionally tragic colonial past. Foulds's doesn't shirk any of the grim details - in fact, the poem is packed with them. An attack in a village:

The men labouring hard, quietly, as in a workshop, a boat builders' yard
limbs and parts scattered around them,
their wet blades in the flamelight
glimmering rose and peach.

Five prisoners are taken from the main camp to be interrogated:

Three weeks later two of the men came back,
wordless and unsteady, heavily edited. Between them:
nine fingers, two ears, three eyes, no testicles.
No good to anyone, they were let out
to wander briefly as mayflies
and die as a warning.

And yet his writing is so precise, so carefully weighted, that you don't feel poisoned by these details: rather than feeling bludgeoned yourself, you feel like Foulds has very skillfully, almost imperceptibly, injected this story into your mind in such a way that you'll never shake it.

Tom put down his biscuit, finished his tea,
and threw the cup against the wall.
It smashed wonderfully, as though charged,
into a thousand tiny white knives and powder.
Tom looked over the whole service,
deaf with pleasure, considering them for bombs.

There's something cinematic about the brevity with which Foulds tells his story; it's like a small collection of very carefully edited scenes. I had a mental flash of detective novels and murder mysteries while reading: the denouement when the detective - flash, flash, flash - tells the true story that's been hiding in plain sight under all the distractions all along.

'The Broken Words' couldn't be more different from the book by Foulds I read earlier this year, *The Quickening Maze*, in subject matter at least. But that lancing attention to detail remains the same, even if the book seems positively baroque in comparison. Highly recommended.

Araz Goran says

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Cheryl Gatling says

This book is about the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s. That was something I knew nothing about, so I naturally looked it up afterward, and was impressed to see how succinctly the author had slipped just the most necessary information into conversations between characters, and descriptions of scenes. The Broken Word was easy to follow even when the historical context was unfamiliar. Tom, a British boy between high school and college, returns home to his family's farm in Kenya, and finds himself sucked into the growing

violence. He is taken on a night-time raiding party, which is more of a murdering party. It turns Tom's stomach, but the older men consider this experience good for him, something to make a man out of him, an induction into the community. Tom goes on to become a guard in a prison camp, where he sees torture up close and personal, and grows more casually violent himself. He eventually goes back to college in England, but he goes back changed. Wikipedia says, "Atrocities were committed by all sides," and this is presented, but the book focuses mostly on the British perspective, since Tom, our protagonist, is British. The cool, thoughtless, sometimes flip manner in which the Brits commit acts of brutality, and then return to their drinks and cigars, is chilling. All except for Tom, who participates, but has doubts, seem to feel completely justified. All scenes are vividly presented, but the book is not cover-to-cover bloodbath. With economy, brief events suggest much more than is portrayed "on screen." So much is suggested that I think many long discussions could be started (or many school term papers be written) about what it all means. One of those long discussions could be about what the rather abrupt (and surprising) ending means, but I leave that for another day on account of spoilers. I think the book was successful both as story, and as poetry. It is both.

Rui Carlos da Cunha says

I found *The Broken Word* a beautifully written narrative in verse that was compelling to believe the experiences of the protagonist during such turbulent times. However, since the tale is told from the colonial English point-of-view and torturing of Africans and other senseless violence is involved, I felt the story was one-sided, intentionally so, and therefore lacking in a multifaceted perspective of many individuals who may have been involved in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising. That and at times locating who is speaking or who is the subject of the line of verse can be confusing, but only slightly. It truly makes me want to inquire further into what took place in Kenya in the 1950's when my parents lived there and my mother waited for a bus while a frightening Mau Mau rebel was within arm's length. It makes me want to read a novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* by MG Vassanji, that also deals with the same time period and subject matter. I thank the publisher's representatives at Penguin for sending me an advanced reader's copy as *The Broken Word* doesn't come out in the States until April 2011.

Upon re-reading the text, I realize that Foulds perhaps is making an indictment of the flailing British Empire in its death throes. That the language sounds exploitative is only because that is what took place back then, exploitation and oppression of the indigenous culture. This is perhaps one of the most beautiful books that I've read in a while, it ends perfectly, so sweetly after such horrors witnessed. I think this novella would be a good text to use for a class on historical verse writing, as Foulds creates such an amazing narrative that it needs to be read over and over until the reader is sick of what took place in Kenya in the 1950's.

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