

African Psycho

Alain Mabanckou

Trans. Christine Schwartz Hartley

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by Jeff Bursey

“I was coming of age and beginning to visit our city’s courthouses, and I have to tell you, we were living through the period of the greatest terror, during which Angoualima sent statuettes with severed heads to his future victims.” Grégoire Nakobomayo, the narrator of *African Psycho*, recalls the deeds of the thief, rapist, and murder Angoualima whom he wants to emulate, and with whom he communicates at his gravesite. To be worthy in Angoualima’s eyes, he plans to “kill Germaine on December 29,” two days after the opening of the novel. Germaine is a prostitute Nakobomayo has befriended solely for the purpose of using her to establish his credentials as a killer. That describes part of the arc of Alain Mabanckou’s latest novel, and gives nothing away that the back of the book and the first paragraphs don’t do themselves.

Born in Congo-Brazzaville (French Congo) in 1966, Mabanckou has won African and French literary prizes for earlier works. He is a poet, and recently has written a biography of James Baldwin. It is hard to say if *African Psycho*, first published in French in 2003 and now translated into English, is representative of his other books. It has been praised for its wit, which it may have in the French original. The narrator lives near the Mayi River in an unspecified city, where the mayor still bends a knee to France. There are constant references to the “country over there”; the district he lives in is called He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot, with such street names as One-Hundred-Francs-Only, and bars named Take and Drink, This Is The Cup of My Blood.

Nakobomayo talks to himself a great deal, and we are kept inside his self-described ugly, shaven, and rectangular head. He has a vocabulary picked up in a scattering of homes, since he was abandoned as an infant (nothing much is made of this, we’re led to read between the lines), and from some acquired education. Picked on as a child, he defends himself spectacularly in a memorable scene, which sets his feet firmly on the path his soul had already been itching to take. As a teenager he engages in petty crimes, and his education continues. We meet him as an adult who works as a car mechanic.

That is not enough for Grégoire. He admires and fears the twelve-fingered, merciless, and clever Angoualima, who steals weapons from several police stations, not to use them, but to flaunt his abilities. “In the days that followed... policemen were booed as they went about walking their beats. They were reminded that they had better focus their efforts on finding Angoualima rather than... hounding pathetic hemp dealers and second-hand dealers. Here and there people shouted, ‘Long live Angoualima!’” Angoualima is “every man” who may be able to “change sex.” Nakobomayo tells us: “Parents forbade their children to utter this cursed name... popular songs banned by the government perpetuated this myth of the faceless murderer.” He is a

chameleon, a shape-shifter, a folk hero “nicknamed the ‘Judge of Darkness’” for killing other criminals. At some point he disappears, and the narrator says he was “forgotten for at least two years.” He comes back, in a manner that it would be a shame to divulge.

There is a problem with this. Such a figure embodies real power. In the novel, he’s on everyone’s minds and lips. The national press and the press of the “country over there” write about him. This ogre has the sheen of Mabanckou’s hard work. How can he expect readers to believe that Angoualima would be forgotten so quickly? Grégoire is not an unreliable narrator in this respect. *African Psycho* has a psychopathic figure in Angoualima, but the psycho the book is supposed to be about is the mechanic, Nakobomayo. Something happened in the writing; I suspect Mabanckou found Angoualima more interesting than his dull acolyte.

Nakobomayo is not helped by being given a bunch of tics: repeating the name of his district at every chance, making weak jokes, or being prissy and saying “thing” (Mabanckou’s italics) instead of cock or cunt. The author includes broad hints about what Nakobomayo is capable of doing, and what he’s likely to do. But with each passing page, the number of possibilities diminishes until at the end there’s nothing but a disappointing cul-de-sac out of which Mabanckou can’t navigate. The title echoes *American Psycho*, but there’s actually nothing controversial or piquant in Mabanckou’s book. In a recent interview with *Savoir* magazine, Mabanckou declared that a “novel without a breath of poetry is a novel that won’t stand the test of time, that won’t last. The greatest novels are infused with poetry. The images, the characters need a force, a human quality that only exists in poetry.” Perhaps in French there is more of a poetic force to Nakobomayo’s run-on sentences and the infrequent Rabelaisian list-making, but there’s little force in this translation. There are passages of noteworthy invention in *African Psycho*. Hopefully, Mabanckou’s other books will be translated soon so that we can see more clearly the extent of his lauded abilities.

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