

SAYING EVERYTHING

MORTALS

Norman Rush

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A third of the way into Norman Rush's *Mortals*, Iris and Ray Finch discuss "certain schools of Greek philosophy" in which "*parrhesia*" or "saying everything" was "part of achieving virtue or enlightenment." For 715 small-print pages, Rush records Ray's internal chatter, lengthy conversations, and compulsive perceptions as Ray, an American English teacher and CIA contract employee in Botswana, stumbles and mumbles toward enlightened virtue or what passes for it in southern Africa in 1993.

Like those consummate avoiders Bob Slocum

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LeCarré, the result would be
something like Mortals.***

in Heller's *Something Happened* (1974) and Jack Gladney in DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Ray Finch is a fearful octopus secreting clouds of ink. The 48-year-old expatriate has good reasons to be afraid: Iris, his decade-younger wife, has taken her psychotherapist, Davis Morel, as her lover, and Ray's station chief has dispatched Ray into the bush on a fruitless, life-threatening mission. Rush uses the domestic triangle and the international intrigue as genre solicitations, but *Mortals* so far exceeds in its detail the codes of social realism and the rules of exotic adventure that Rush seems to be suggesting either that literature is "pathetic signs and scratchings" or the opposite, that literature can be best made Gaddis-fashion by "saying everything."

Mortals has been castigated in the popular press for its logorrhea, but I think it's an ideal beach book for the literary, if they go to beaches. Rush elicits just enough sympathy for his bumbling spy and provides

adequate curiosity about his plot to keep you from drowning when you're not laughing out loud at Ray, the student of *Paradise Lost* who tries to talk his way around or out of contemporary hells partly of his own making.

Mortals is Rush's third book, all set in Botswana, where he worked for the Peace Corps. *Whites* (1986) was a collection of straightforward local-color stories. *Mating*, which won the National Book Award for fiction in 1991, treated a female utopian community in the Kalahari Desert and the mating game between the community's American founder and his American admirer, an unnamed female narrator. *Mating* had some literary gamesmanship—a possibly unreliable narrator—but the novel was essentially realistic in its presentation of dense Botswana information. In *Mortals*, Botswana recedes into the background, and Ray's hyperconsciousness—of his immediate surroundings, of his past reading, of his minute-to-minute anxieties—dominates the novel's foreground. In a tight spot, Ray recalls bits of "Beckett's plays, many of them taking place in settings like the one he and Morel were in." If Beckett had rewritten LeCarré, the result would be something like *Mortals*.

Growing up in Oakland, Boy Scout Ray resented his younger, verbally brilliant brother, Rex. As a fledgling scholar, Ray published two articles on Milton but failed as an academic in America and took his rather naïve (but also verbally inventive) wife to Africa, where Ray had a succession of teaching jobs. To supplement his income, he does low-level surveillance for the CIA. Although Ray has an excellent memory, he lacks imagination—which he loves in Iris and hates in Rex. Ray also hates mysteries and secrets (one somewhat paradoxical reason for joining "the agency"), but he spends much of his psychological energy keeping his fears and desires and family dynamics secret from himself.

Iris forces Ray to confront his limitations, as does the station chief who dispatches him with a ridiculous cover to investigate a popular uprising against the central government. Before Ray can report back, the station chief, a paranoically drawn brute, panics and calls in Boer mercenaries who capture Ray and, believing him part of the uprising, torture him. When

Iris sends Morel (another American expat) to find her husband, Morel is also captured and placed in the same room with Ray, giving them an interesting prisoner's dilemma to sort out if either one is to survive.

For campfire reading, Ray has taken into the bush his dying gay brother's experimental fiction manuscript, *Strange News*. Feeling guilty about his relation with Rex and devoted to literature, Ray goes to wacky lengths to retrieve the manuscript from his captors, who think its oddities may be coded instructions to the rebels they are trying to kill. When Ray manages to find the manuscript, he tapes it to his chest (literature as protection). Then Ray realizes the thick manuscript looks like a bomb (literature as weapon), an illusion he can use to subdue the evil Boer mercenaries in a transcendently comic episode.

Published ten years after its events and after the coming of Mandela in South Africa, *Mortals* isn't much of a weapon, not against social injustice. Iris asks Ray early on, "do you want to keep on psychologizing, something I thought you hated, by the way"? Rush's primary target is the psychology of Ray and other male "saviors" in the novel, men who claim intellectual or aesthetic superiority over women but involve themselves in violent, largely futile games. And when these don't work out, Rush's male characters engage in elaborate rationalizations. Ray is a victim of his literature-based expectations and values, but classic literature does lead Ray to partial enlightenment when he eventually sees himself as Charles Bovary. Rush also allows Ray a modicum of virtue at novel's end.

"Reading novels is," Iris says, "a form of waiting." Rush makes his readers wait and wade through the repetitions of Ray's obsessions. But the plot is linear (if glacial), and *Mortals*, like *Strange News* within

it, contains numerous entertaining set pieces, particularly when Rex and other correspondents report American pop cultural trends that are especially ridiculous within the Botswana context. Morel wants to rid Africa of Christianity, and the lengthy speeches that Rush gives him are learned, if not profound. The leader of the rebels, Kerekang, has, like the protagonist of *Mating*, an interesting antidevelopment agenda. Admirers of *Mating* will be happy with the chapter that reports the post-Africa life of that novel's protagonists. Persons who have read *Paradise Lost* more recently than I will almost certainly find instructive parallels between it and *Mortals*. But its primary pleasures are sentence to sentence, even phrase to phrase, as Ray's mind oscillates between the possibly insightful and the probably stupid, refined sensibility and bathetic sentimentality.

Ray initially despises the "assemblage" of Rex's manuscript, but *Mortals* turns out to be rather similar in its grab-bag quality to *Strange News*. "Literature is humanity talking to itself," Ray thinks. *Mortals* is Ray Finch talking to himself, but it's also literature talking to and through other literature from Milton to Flaubert to Joyce to Beckett and, though unnamed, to the priest of resentment, Thomas Bernhard. Botswana was a paradise lost to Christian colonials. Ray's marriage was to him a paradise lost to a less literary, more ideological man. Modernist literature was a grandiose paradise for its initiates. All these "paradises" were mortal. *Mortals* is Finch's wake, a sad story and garulous celebration of making do with odds and ends.

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