



Confession of the Lioness by Mia Couto

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on June 15, 2015

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Confession of the Lioness by Mia Couto (trans. David Brookshaw). \$25.00, 192 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux

In 2008, the celebrated Mozambican writer Mia Couto received the kind of gift that writers pray for: a real-life experience full of danger, drama, and supernatural overtones, seemingly custom-made for a book.

A biologist by profession, Couto was responsible for fifteen young environmental field officers who were sent to Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado as part of an oil company's seismic exploration. Around that time, a series of fatal lion attacks broke out in the same area. Hunters were sent from the capital to protect the field officers, who were traveling on foot and sleeping in tents. Local people suggested there was something uncanny about the killer lions, and the hunters deduced that these dark suspicions grew from buried social conflicts.

"I lived through this whole situation at close quarters," writes Couto. "The frequent visits I made to where this drama was taking place gave me the idea for the story that I am about to tell, which was inspired by real facts and people."

If only Couto had told this story straight—in lightly fictionalized form, or even as a work of nonfiction. One can imagine the night-time sounds, the strained nerves of the villagers, the rush of panic when a child or a spouse goes missing. Are the local people grateful to the hunters, or resentful? What do the young field officers talk about with the hunters—or do they talk at all?

What we get in *Confession of the Lioness*, however, is a muddled morality tale that does not satisfy as either journalism or parable.

The novel is told in alternating sections: "The Hunter's Diary" and "Mariama's Version." The hunter is Archangel Bullseye, or Archie for short. (Perhaps it sounds better in Portuguese.) Mariama is a young woman who has lost her twin sisters to drowning and a third sister to a lion.

Despite his grandiose name, Bullseye turns out to be a lousy hunter, more preoccupied with his love life than with the task at hand. Accompanied by a government administrator, the administrator's wife, and a well-known and rather smug writer (Couto poking fun at himself), he arrives at the village of Kulumani after dark, apparently

heedless of the danger and unconcerned about frightening the people.

Bullseye spurns the offer of a goat to be used as bait, and he destroys the traps that the villagers set for the lion. He claims not to need a tracker, but makes no effort to track the lions himself. Later he even fakes an encounter with a lion.

The words of Mariama and of Bullseye—once he is on the scene—make it clear that all is not well with the women of Kulumani. Mariama’s father calls his wife “woman” and threatens to tie her up like an animal. “We women have been buried for a long time now,” Mariama’s mother tells her. “Your father buried me; your grandmother, your great-grandmother, they were all entombed alive.”

Some of the women of Kulumani, we gradually realize, have not been killed by the lions—they have become lions themselves, wordless embodiments of their long-buried rage. It’s a striking idea, but hard to square with the fact that the lions kill women as well as men. Moreover, there is the wise old man who claims, “I am a maker of lions,” and some men also appear to be turning into lions, after stripping themselves naked and dousing themselves with an infusion of tree bark.

Passages in Couto’s novel *A River Called Time* demonstrate that he is fully capable of gritty realism. In fact, the dusty palm trees and crumbling concrete walls of that book make the eerie aspects even eerier. The new book is lacking in that kind of sharply observed detail, and the language is often peculiar. One might be tempted to blame this on the translator, except that David Brookshaw was also responsible for the elegant style of Couto’s earlier and better books.

“I was hunger from head to foot, and my mouth watered viscous saliva,” Mariama reports after her father feeds the family a roasted vulture. Speaking of his love for his brother’s girlfriend, the hunter writes, “It’s because of her that I’m writing this diary, in the vain hope that this woman will one day read my muddled scrawl. Moreover, it’s not the first time that I’ve embellished my handwriting for the sake of Luzilia.”

Is Mariama’s saliva watery or viscous? Is the hunter’s handwriting scrawled or embellished? Is embellished really the word he’s looking for? This kind of language can’t be chalked up to the quirks of the characters, because all the characters seems to speak that way.

Last year, Mia Couto received the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. *Confession of the Lioness* is published by the estimable Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Readers who come to this novel without having experienced the subtle and unsettling mythmaking of his earlier works may wonder why.

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa* and the editor of *African Lives: An Anthology of Memoirs and Autobiographies*. His next book, *Thoreau’s Wildflowers*, will be published by Yale University Press in the spring of 2016.

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