



## Magical Realist Africa: A River Called Time by Mia Couto

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on June 7, 2010

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**A River Called Time by Mia Couto. Serpent's Tail, 232 pages, 15.95.**



*A River Called Time* is the latest novel by Mozambican writer Mia Couto to be translated and published by the British press Serpent's Tail.

Like other fiction by Couto, this one takes place in a dreamlike land that is and is not Mozambique. The tiny country in which the book is set consists of an island named Luar-do-Chão (Moonlight on the Ground) and a city on the mainland. Cashews are grown, most people speak Portuguese, and women wear a kind of Mozambican sarong called a capulana. The country has recently fought a guerrilla war: presumably a Marxist revolution, because the beret on one character's old uniform bears a red star.

As the novel begins, a young man named Mariano is on a ship bound for the island, to attend the funeral of his grandfather, also named Mariano. However, it is unclear whether the grandfather is effectively dead, or entirely dead. He lies day after day in a room from which the roof has been removed, immobile and unresponsive, but with a just detectable pulse and respiration. The local doctor, an Indian man from Goa, pronounces him to be in a cataleptic state but won't commit himself as to whether this means he is dead and can be buried.

Old Mariano has made young Mariano responsible for his affairs, and as he hangs around the island trying to decide what to do, he finds the first of a series of letters addressed to him. They are unsigned, the handwriting resembles his own, and they seem to come from his undead grandfather. They offer him guidance and advice, urge him not to allow the burial to happen yet, and little by little offer clues to the secrets of the island.

Couto writes well, and his unnamed country is sometimes reminiscent of the Macondo of Gabriel Garcia Marquez—especially as described in Garcia Marquez’ short stories. The narrative has a kind of dream logic, in which everyday occurrences take on symbolic weight and maids and gravediggers make weighty pronouncements. Characters have symbolic names, like people in *Pilgrim’s Progress*: young Mariano’s rich and arrogant uncle Ultimio, his austere, self-effacing uncle Abstinêncio, and his alluring aunt Admirança.

Unfortunately, the kind of vague portentousness that can lend atmosphere to a short story can begin wearisome over the course of a novel. Important ideas—the legacy of the war, the continuing racial tension—are floated but left maddeningly unexplored. Oddly, some of the best writing in the book is the most “realistic,” making one wonder what a Mia Couto novel with no magical realism might be like.

Until recently, the town only had one street. It went by the ironic name of Middle Street. Now, a network of other roads of loose sand had been opened up. But the town was still too rural, for it lacked the geometry of planned spaces. There were the coconut palms, the crows, the slow burning fires coming into view. The cement houses were in ruins, exhausted by years of neglect. It wasn’t just the houses that were falling to pieces: time itself was crumbling away. I could still see letters on a wall through the grime of time: ‘Our land will be the graveyard of capitalism.’ During the war, I had had visions that I never wanted repeated. As if such memories came from a part of me that had already died.

After visiting a priest to discuss his grandfather’s funeral services, young Mariano is startled to see a donkey inside the church. “I jumped with fright at such an unexpected vision. What was an animal doing in the sacred refuge of souls?”

The priest is apparently asking himself the same thing. “I’ll give you a prize if you manage to get it out of here,” he says, then adds, “Later, your grandmother will explain the reason for the donkey’s presence here.”

By now I was wondering whether even half the book’s questions would get any kind of answer. To his credit, Couto does unravel two of the book’s key mysteries by the end: a previously unsolved murder and a family secret that overturns young Mariano’s relationship to his father, his grandfather, and his aunt Admirança. It’s a welcome development but is not quite enough to make this a satisfying novel.

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa*. He is currently editing an anthology of African memoirs.

