

BOOKS



City living: scavengers on the Olusosun landfill site in Lagos. Teju Cole charts the underside of Nigeria's economic growth

BOOKS

New maps of Africa

Striking portraits of Lagos and Johannesburg
By Hedley Twidle

Every Day Is for the Thief
Teju Cole

Faber & Faber, 163pp, £12.99

Dispatcher: Lost and Found in Johannesburg
Mark Gevisser

Granta Books, 368pp, £18.99

Lagos and Johannesburg: the two big, bad economic powerhouses of the African continent, neck and neck at the top of the GDP charts. *Every Day Is for the Thief* by Teju Cole and *Dispatcher* by Mark Gevisser are meditations on each city, respectively: one slim and spare; one garrulous and super-abundant. Both are eagerly awaited follow-ups to highly acclaimed works, and each

must face the challenges created by second-album syndrome.

Thief reads as a deliberately minor afterword to the literary hit of *Open City* (like *Kid A* after *OK Computer*) – but this Faber edition is in fact a remastered version of a book first published in 2007 by Cassava Press, the Nigerian imprint. That same year brought Gevisser's monumental biography

of the then South African president, Thabo Mbeki, *The Dream Deferred*. His Joburg memoir, *Dispatcher*, takes the other option for follow-up albums: the hyper-ambitious, super-produced, everything-and-the-kitchen-sink approach. Yet these two city books are linked by an inquiry into the mysterious ways in which the spaces of our early lives come to structure imagination, creativity, the self – and what happens when these primal attachments must weather disaffection, estrangement and violence.

"Every day is for the thief," reads the Yoruba proverb that stands as the epigraph to Cole's work, "but one day is for the owner." The pages that follow comprise a notebook of a return to his native land, a travelogue in short sections as artfully composed and sharply focused (or impressionistically unfocused) as the photographs with which they are interspersed. The thievery begins at a New York consulate, as the narrator applies for a new Nigerian passport to return home and learns about extra, under-the-counter fees required for "expediting" the process. Having touched down in Lagos, he keeps a meticulous balance sheet of all the demands for bribes and micro-extortions that he encounters – which generally take

JACOB SILBERBERG/PANOS

place under huge billboards asking the public to report corruption.

Set against this punctilious social accounting is a more elusive and expansive register that records the complex experiences of re-encountering old friends and old flames; of reinhabiting family spaces and feeling the return of a generosity that marks a break from the cold, cramped quarters of his years in the north, “endured like a prince in exile”. In an unusual and affecting passage, the narrative inverts the customary memoirist’s description of returning to a childhood home and finding it smaller than remembered. Instead, this “great house in Africa” seems enlarged: “It is as though I have shrunk in the years since I was last here, or the house itself has gently expanded in the heat.” Yet anything verging on easy nostalgia is handled very cautiously, even clinically, and the stern litmus tests that the narrator applies to any context he finds himself in – museums, bookshops, concert halls – do not let up. There is something almost Naipaulian about the way he constantly holds Nigeria’s institutions up against some universal (Anglo-American?) ideal of excellence and generally finds them wanting.

One section evokes the complex ecosystem of the Tomsed cyber café, where the narrator spies the man next to him pecking out an email that includes the words “transfer”, “dear friend”, and “deposited in your account forthwith”. Seeing one of the fabled “419 scams” (the number refers to the relevant article of the Nigerian Criminal Code), he remarks: “I feel as though I have discovered the source of the Nile or the Niger.” Looking at all these “yahoo boys”, tapping out their supplications, trawling the world for credulous internet users through their chat functions, he imagines Lagos as “a city of Scheherazades”: “The stories unfold in ever more fanciful iterations and, as in the myth, those who tell the best stories are richly rewarded.” But the fascination soon fades as he realises that this is hardly a noteworthy sight: just part of a daily cycle of humiliation and blackmail, the police periodically hauling out a scammer to defraud him in turn. By way of a quick detour to the Yahoos of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, we are led to the conclusion that the Lagos equivalents have reversed Marx’s dictum and bucked a trend: the Yahoos show up the first time as farce and “the second, in Nigeria, as something more tragic”.

It is clever, no doubt. *Thief* is made of clever, perceptive and limpid prose at every turn. But its cleverness is of a different order from that of *Open City*, and perhaps less interesting. That earlier/later work places its own cleverness and erudition under searching question even as it uses it to seduce us.

The result is a profoundly disconcerting book, for reasons that have something to do with what a novel can do that even the most creative experiment in non-fiction cannot. It can deploy an unreliable narrator – and not just a reliably unreliable narrator (a fairly common literary device, as James Wood points out), but an unreliably unreliable narrator.

I would class the young doctor Julius of *Open City* in these Rumsfeldian terms: I am not sure how much distance to take from his perfectly modulated sentences; I’m not sure if there is any unreliability at all – but, at second glance, there must be. Some late-in-the-day revelations about him detonate backwards through the novel, posing the question of just how much trust can be invested in the controlling narrative intelligence, which flaunts its breadth of cultural reference and discriminates so finely. Is his earnest enthusiasm for avant-garde Slovakian chamber music for real? On the one hand: yes, of course, and why not? Part of the energy of Cole’s project comes from its unashamed interest in difficult artistic work. On the other hand, there is the

“Safety is not the point. The semblance of safety is what we were after”

creeping sensation that this investment in high culture might be camouflaging some unsavoury aspects of Julius’s history; that somewhere, somehow, a false note is being struck. Or, to change metaphors: like a digital camera struggling with an elusively lit scene, the reader’s interpretive apparatus whirrs, focuses, defocuses, tries again, can’t quite come to rest. And there is no way of resolving the issue on the evidence in front of us. The matter is, like the city, left open.

In *Thief*, this prose mechanism is not quite perfected. On the title page the work is described as fiction, but (unless I am missing something super-subtle) there is little to prevent us from mapping the “I” of the narrative fairly directly on to the experience of its author. But we can hear the more complex voice of *Open City* evolving. The narrator experiments with a voice that is intended to rile, to discomfort and to provoke. Again, the trigger that comes to mind here is Naipaul, whom Cole writes about meeting in an essay for the *New Yorker*. At a fancy party in a loft apartment, the young literary sensation toasts the wily old master: “‘I don’t agree with all your views, and in fact there are many of them I strongly disagree with,’ – I said ‘strongly’ with what I hoped was a menacing tone – ‘but from you I have

learned how to be productively disagreeable in my own views.’”

There are countless examples of Naipaul being disagreeable, but one of my favourites is his 1987 attack on magical realism, “the way of fantasy and extravagance” that such writers as García Márquez, Okri and Rushdie once established as almost the default setting for post-colonial fiction in the late 20th century: “It is safe . . . empty, morally and intellectually,” he fumes; “it makes writing . . . an aspect of the corruption of the countries out of which it emerges.” At one point, the narrator of *Thief* describes the abundant “literary texture” of Nigeria, the “lives full of unpredictable narrative” that seem like details from a Márquez novel, just “awaiting their recording angel”. In fact, Cole’s prose tends always towards the other end of the spectrum, eschewing any fictional special effects for the long, hard, secular look: the world is what it is.

Once most definitely *persona non grata* in the post-colonial seminar room, Naipaul and his divisive techniques are, it seems, being cited increasingly by writers who are wary of boosterish African literary prizes, Afropolitan fashion weeks and African art shows – the cultural roadshow that seems to be riding on the back of the “Africa Rising” idea, as trumpeted by the likes of the *Economist*. These writers are looking for more analytic bite in tackling the venality of the ruling elite, and for a way of bringing home how rising GDP means nothing if it creates rising inequality – indeed, less than nothing, given that more unequal societies inexorably become more violent and dysfunctional.

Thief unfolds at a moment when Nigeria is beginning to move up a gear, a phase in which it has just eclipsed South Africa as the continent’s largest economy. But the book also charts the underside to this change, most powerfully in a hopeless and fearful scene in which some thuggish “area boys” menace the narrator’s uncle Tunde: they hang around and demand their share as the family attempts to unload a shipping container from the United States that is meant to supply a local school. In another passage the narrator makes the immensely disagreeable argument that “Nigerians do not always have the philosophical equipment to deal with the material goods they are so eager to consume”. Instead (we are told) they fall back on the catchphrase *idea l’a need*: “all we need is the general idea or concept”. Unclear reception and only one channel from satellite TV? “Why bother with sharp reception when you can have snowy reception?” Broken safety belt? “Oh, pull it across your chest and sit on the buckle, he says, *idea l’a need*. Safety is not the ►

► point. The semblance of safety is what we were after.”

Do Nigerian readers flinch at such sweeping social diagnoses? But here again we see the deliberate disagreeableness of Cole’s literary personae: clever men who possess the secret strength of not wanting or needing to be liked. Indian critics remarked, after *An Area of Darkness*, that they agreed with Naipaul while they were at home but disagreed with him when abroad. Trading on its insider-outsider status, Cole’s writing about his motherland compels us to respond, to argue, and to be difficult: to be sand rather than oil in the cogs of the world.

“Probably the finest piece of non-fiction to come out of South Africa since the end of apartheid” – this verdict from the *TLS* on Mark Gevisser’s biography of Thabo Mbeki appears on the back of his new book. And this within a very strong field: there has been an outpouring of innovative and ambitious non-fiction here in the past few decades (although, as David Shields remarks, to use this term for such a range of narrative forms is like using the phrase “non-socks” for a whole wardrobe of clothes). Even so, the praise is hardly dust-jacket hyperbole. *The Dream Deferred* is a baggy monster of a biography that reads like a political thriller, ranging all over the world to trace the cultural formation of South Africa’s toppled philosopher-king.

At one point, the president thinks back to when the leadership of the African National Congress was invited to attend a psychedelic extravaganza at the Shrine, Fela Kuti’s club in Lagos: “Thabo Mbeki opened his eyes again and found himself back in his official presidential residence in August 2000, before him not a musician in underpants holding a saxophone but a biographer in a suit holding a tape recorder.” It is an example of how the political journalism by which Gevisser made his name has always been freighted with literary texture; and how his portraits of others have always held slivers of self. *The Dream Deferred* overflows its initial brief and becomes a coded attempt to assess the writer’s own place – and the possibilities of his humanist intellectual formation – in contemporary South Africa.

With *Dispatcher*, Gevisser swivels his sights 180 degrees, turning on the self and making explicit this previously submerged personal journey. The title offers the master metaphor of the text: a game that he would play as a child with the *Holmden’s Register of Johannesburg*, sending couriers on imaginary journeys through the city’s streets. But *Holmden’s*, he came to realise, showed the suburbs as discrete, bounded entities,

like islands. Unlike the London A-Z, it was a non-continuous map, with no hint of how to pass, say, from the rich suburbs of Sandton to the “dark city” of Alexandra. *Dispatcher* is generously supplied with images that show us the “long tradition of Soweto-denial” in Joburg map-making: the townships of the south-west are usually obscured by a magnified inset of the city centre. As the young Gevisser puzzles these matters out, he begins to understand the extreme injustice of the city into which he has been born: “Thus began, cartographically, the dawning of my political consciousness.”

Cole’s persona is openly disagreeable; Gevisser wants to be liked

But cartomania is only one of many literary *topoi* (thematic or figurative “places”, literally) in the book. There are brilliant watery meditations on urban rivers as boundaries but also as “gaps in the urban stitching of apartheid”; on the suburban swimming pools of “Fringe Country”, where various races covertly frolicked, violating the apartheid “Immorality Act” in the 1960s. There are disquisitions on the ground plan of Johannesburg’s old Braamfontein Cemetery; on Super 8 film; on the figure of the *flâneur*. Gevisser invokes Baudelaire, Joyce and *Open City* – but only to suggest how their wandering protagonists are an impossibility in his metropolis of the global South. Here the walkers are workers and migrants without access to public transport: “the stories their feet tell . . . are often ones of pain and dislocation. The rest of us drive.”

He traces a family history that leads back to Lithuania and the horrific experience of Jewish communities there during the Holocaust. He analyses his family’s photo albums, noting how servants tend to be

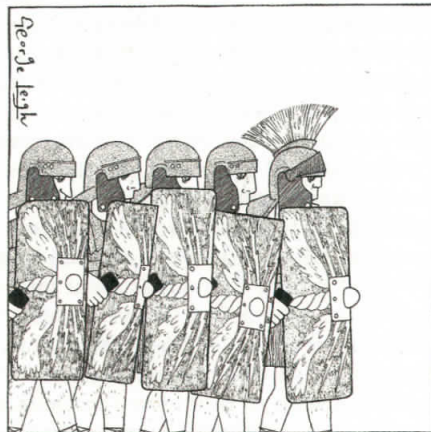
focal points within the images, given that they alone look at the camera; he visits the artist William Kentridge, who cuts up street guides of Johannesburg. And that’s just the first 50 pages.

As *Dispatcher* unfolds, it moves underground. We are taken into the subterranean universe of Johannesburg’s vast mine workings, “another civilisation, in which the components of surface life – space, time, sound, light, climate – had been rearranged unintelligibly”. At the same time, the writing evolves a risky equivalence between this literal underground and the concealed, once-illicit underworld of gay sexuality, adding a vertical axis to the horizontal dispatch routes. And finally: welded on to this already busy conceptual architecture is an account of an armed robbery perpetrated on the author and two friends.

Gevisser remarked at a book launch that he had not wanted to write the usual book about fear, crime and loathing in Johannesburg. But then, revising a draft of his work during a visit back from France, he was subjected to a much more traumatic form of boundary-crossing. Three men slipped effortlessly in through the sliding door of a Joburg apartment and kept their victims trussed and sick with suspense for over three hours. A long section is devoted to processing this event and its aftermath, jolting what had been an expansive, unhurried memoir into very different gear.

Whether this absorbing but unwieldy mass of text holds together as a single work will probably depend on how you respond to the rhetorical performance at its centre: a narrator who guides, anticipates your questions, circles back, reminds you of this or that, helps you make connections. If Cole’s persona is deliberately disagreeable, that of Gevisser is quite the opposite: he wants very much to be liked. At times the effect is like being on the receiving end of 300-plus pages of dinner-table anecdotes, as told by a host who is just too charming to interrupt and tell that it really is time you got going.

But Gevisser’s work takes in far more of the city than most Joburg books, wading in where others (more cowed by critiques of white writers producing accounts of black lives) would fear to tread. In one of the most affecting sections, “The Ballad of Phil and Edgar”, he excavates the histories of two gay men from Soweto, known as “After Nines” because they embarked on their secret lives at night. Gevisser provides fascinating histories of other gaps in the urban stitching of apartheid: spaces of cross-racial intimacy that range from Hillbrow nightclubs to Bachelor’s Cove on the Atlantic seaboard in Cape Town.



“On my signal, tweet using the hashtag: #Ihatebarbarians”

As the book generates momentum, the restlessness and sheer scope of Gevisser's despatching produces an array of unexpected and generative encounters that begin a process of healing after the trauma of the home invasion. At one point a stern bureaucrat in the department of home affairs lectures Mark, explaining that he and his husband-to-be are part of the constitution, and consequently he should be making a much bigger deal of their wedding ceremony: "Do you think you are a second-class citizen just because you are gay? You have full rights in this new South Africa. You have the right to make a fuss."

This aesthetic of abundance and openness is the most powerful element of the work. It stems unstoppably from the author's impulse to put his body in places where it has never been; to ignore the kind of cultural policing that decides who can write about what. As such, *Dispatcher* joins a range of experiments in non-fiction from South Africa that are by turns compelling and troubling, generous and chaotic – and which, in their willingness to take on as much as they do, are able to get to places that the post-apartheid novel struggles to reach. For South African writers, as the saying goes, don't know their country well enough to write fiction about it. ●

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The original Ed Miliband

Francis Beckett

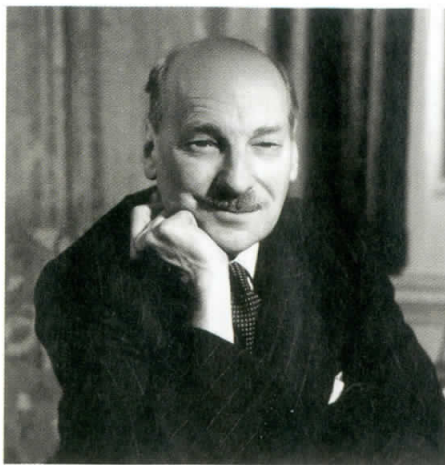
**Clement Attlee:
the Inevitable Prime Minister**

Michael Jago

Biteback, 400pp, £25

Does anyone still need to be convinced that Clement Attlee was not "a modest little man with plenty to be modest about"? The phrase is commonly attributed to Winston Churchill, but Churchill knew a formidable politician when he saw one: it was actually coined by the left-wing journalist Claud Cockburn.

If there is anyone left who holds that view, Michael Jago's new book powerfully refutes it. It also conclusively jettisons the idea that he became prime minister by accident, that the job was supposed to go to someone larger and noisier – Herbert Morrison or Hugh Dalton or Ernest Bevin – but fell into Little Clem's hands by mistake. His premiership was much less accidental than that of Harold Wilson or Tony Blair, who probably would



No more Mister Shy: Attlee in 1950

never have made it to Downing Street without the early and unexpected death of their predecessors as Labour leader Hugh Gaitskill and John Smith.

Today, neither of these views has much of a following. You now hear them only in the most dedicated Blairite circles, where contempt for Attlee is still mandatory. A more commonly held view today is that the achievements of the 1945 Labour government were really down to the large personalities surrounding Attlee. Jago has little time for that, either. He shows that none of the other possible leaders – Bevin, Dalton, Morrison, Stafford Cripps – could have led as successfully a government as Attlee led.

Three out of four isn't bad, but I wish Jago had nailed the one myth that still has wide currency. He falls for the current conventional wisdom that Attlee, modest, shy in company, lacking in charisma, deeply private, could never be prime minister in today's savage political environment.

But why not? Because they need an image? Prime ministers have needed an image at least since universal suffrage: think of the calm, reassuring, pipe-smoking Stanley Baldwin, or the unflappable, patrician Harold Macmillan. Attlee had an image. A wise man, he made his image rather like the real thing – quiet, cricket-loving, terse, a suburban bank manager – and it resonated with the times.

Because prime ministers need to be good broadcasters? Attlee was one of the first great political broadcasters, as Jago shows. He had a radio manner as well suited for the first years of peace as Churchill's was for the desperate years of war. Because they need to understand the media? Prime ministers employ people to do that. Attlee employed Francis Williams and wisely let him get on with it, refusing to obsess about the viciously hostile press coverage he inevitably got. Williams understood the media so

that his employer didn't have to. As a 21st-century PM Attlee would have had to learn a few different tricks, of course, but he could have coped.

The question matters if you think, as I do, that Ed Miliband is a potential Clement Attlee figure. He, too, is physically not large and looks commonplace and a little geeky. And he, like Attlee, is a quiet, private man with a decision-making process like a steel trap, which is why we and the Americans are not bombing Syria and why the bosses at News International are sticking pins into a wax model of him.

Jago, like all previous Attlee biographers (including myself), has struggled with this privacy of Attlee's. The man seems to have felt no need to unburden himself. There are two collections of private letters: a lifelong correspondence with his elder brother Tom and those written late in life to his American friend Patricia Beck. Tom and Patricia kept the letters they received; Clem burned their replies. Within an hour of the sudden and early death of his wife, Violet, he burned all the letters he had sent her. He was determined to starve Jago and me of our natural sustenance.

Jago has nonetheless produced a thoughtful and readable biography, and has made his own contribution to the Attlee canon with new research and insights. His chapter on the Second World War gives Attlee, perhaps for the first time, his proper role as the essential partner to Churchill, and the Labour leader who used the war to pave the way for a peacetime Labour government.

He is also very good on Prime Minister Attlee's relationship with the security services (Jago's previous book is a life of "Jack" Bingham, the spy who was John le Carré's model for George Smiley) though it is odd that a chapter entitled "From Lord Haw-Haw to Burgess and Maclean" contains not a single mention of Lord Haw-Haw. He offers a detailed account of how India attained independence, as well as excellent descriptions of the twists and turns of Attlee's relationships with the United States, the Soviet Union and Palestine.

However, he seems to have much less interest in the creation of the welfare state, covering it in a few paragraphs tacked on as an afterthought. As most people consider that to be the great achievement of the Attlee government, it makes for a curiously unbalanced book. The slaying of Beveridge's five giant evils by building the National Health Service and the benefits system, and implementing the Education Act 1944, is surely at the heart of Attlee's life and legacy. ●

Francis Beckett's most recent book is "What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us?" (Biteback, £12.99)