Heart Of The Matter Essay, Research Paper

Heart of the matter Any Human Heart William Boyd 503pp, Hamish Hamilton A quotation from Henry James furnishes the title of William Boyd’s new novel: “Never say you know the last word about any human heart.” These “intimate journals” of Logan Mountstuart initially seem ready for the challenge. But, as becomes clear, both reality and art have a way of endlessly bifurcating the whole truth into many. Born in 1906 and brought up in South America, Logan is the son of a Scottish beef baron, Francis Mountstuart, and his secretary, Mercedes de Solis. “I stir the memory soup in my head hoping gobbets of Uruguay float to the surface. I can see the frigorifico – a vast white factory with its stone jetty and towering chimneystack. I can hear the lowing of a thousand cattle waiting to be slaughtered, butchered, cleaned and frozen.” Logan’s life – either as diary entries, or redacted into small, third-person bridging passages – is similarly prepared for public consumption by Boyd. We see him at public school in England in the 1920s with his friends Peter Scabius and Benjamin Leeping, and then at Oxford, where he falls in love with the mysterious Land Fothergill. A public, historical narrative shadows the personal one: “Coffee with Land Fothergill at the Cadena. She was wearing a velvet coat that matched her eyes. We talked a little stiffly about Mussolini and Italy and I was embarrassed to note how much better informed she was than I.” Embarrassment turns out to be Logan’s key note, as we follow him into a literary career, several marriages, and meetings with a host of famous folk through the century. But the flipside of modest, unassuming Logan is sexual staggishness and a refusal to be cowed by grand public figures. After a monograph on Shelley and a bestselling novel about a French prostitute, he drifts into alcohol, adultery and literary criticism. A spiky encounter with Virginia Woolf is followed by meetings with Picasso and Joyce in Paris. A spell as a reporter in the Spanish Civil war brings him into contact with Hemingway and into possession of three Braque canvases. The paintings are eventually sold by Logan’s old schoolfriend Leeping, now a successful gallery owner – who will, in time, offer Logan a job as his New York representative. In the interval come both the book’s most entertaining and harrowing sections. Working for Ian Fleming (another womaniser) in naval intelligence during the second world war, Logan is posted to the Bahamas to keep an eye on the Duke of Windsor and Mrs Simpson. Edward is suspected of links with German financiers. The murder of a Bahamian bigwig seems to involve the Duke, and Logan feels honour-bound to investigate. But the whole thing is hushed up. Recalled to London, he is parachuted into Switzerland, where he is to pose as a Uruguayan shipbroker offering passage to fleeing Nazis. Picked up almost at once by Swiss intelligence, he spends the rest of the war in prison. On returning to England, he suffers a nervous breakdown. It later turns out that his betrayal to the Swiss may have been Edward and Mrs Simpson’s revenge upon him. Logan runs into them again on New York’s 5th Avenue in the 1960s. “I can’t resist it and shout out: ‘WHO KILLED SIR HARRY OAKES?’ The look of terrified panicked shock on their faces is adequate compensation for me – for everything they did to me, for all time. They can do their worst now. They scramble into their limousine and are swept away.” The characterisation of these public figures is superb – especially Mrs Simpson as a kind of nightmare granny – but unknown characters also spring to life. There are some wonderful vignettes of Logan’s mother in increasingly reduced circumstances. She eventually has to take in lodgers. Logan himself – as his friend Peter Scabius rises to literary stardom – also suffers a mighty fall. By the 1970s, after a period as a schoolmaster in Biafra, and now quite forgotten as a writer, he is living on dogfood and selling revolutionary newspapers in London – a profession which leads him into involvement with the Baader-Meinhof Gang. Inconceivable as it may seem, the links between these different lives are plausibly entwined. The only false thread is the introduction into the New York art-scene sections, alongside Jackson Pollock and Frank O’Hara, of the bogus American painter Nat Tate, whose “biography” Boyd published as a hoax in 1998. The device punctures the realism Boyd has so carefully built up in the rest of the novel. At the same time, however, the Tate references remind us that Any Human Heart is a created work expressing the concerns, passions and hobbyhorses of its begetter – just as, in one sense, Logan’s journal does. As he puts it: “We keep a journal to entrap the collection of selves that forms us, the individual human being.” Yet while it proclaims its own internal flux (”the true journal…doesn’t try to posit any order or hierarchy, doesn’t try to judge or analyse”), Any Human Heart is actually a highly ordered and controlled encounter with that classic French literary form, the journal intime. If it is not quite as successful as what might be taken as its companion among Boyd’s other volumes, The New Confessions (1988), which used Rousseau as a sounding board to recount another 20th-century life, that’s because that book was one of the best novels of recent times. And while both have French models, it is Anthony Powell and Evelyn Waugh who are Boyd’s true ancestors. Both writers appear in Any Human Heart . Powell is “affable”; Waugh, or a drunken man at a party who Logan thinks is Waugh, “stuck his tongue in my mouth”. Logan’s true secret sharer, the real tongue in his mouth, is Boyd himself, of course. From his 1981 debut, A Good Man in Africa, onwards, he seems constantly to have been searching for a unifying identity across different fictions, trying to make sense of a life comprising a brutal public-school education, Africa in wartime, Oxford (where he did a PhD on Shelley), literary London and New York glamour: to a large degree, the plot of Any Human Heart . So when all is said and done, the heart the novel tries to dissect is the author’s own. It is, as ever, an enjoyable spectacle for his readers. Giles Foden’s new novel, Zanzibar , is published by Faber in September.