

Mungo the master

James Hopkin on how a slave learns to direct the narrative of his own life. *A Harlot's Progress*, by David Dabydeen, 280pp, Jonathan Cape, £10

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In 1732, the artist William Hogarth produced the first of his series of prints depicting "modern moral subjects". Intended to be both satirical and instructive, *A Harlot's Progress* includes a scene in which a startled black servant-boy witnesses a quarrel between the whore and her "Jew Protector".

David Dabydeen's inventive third novel takes the boy out of the frame and supplies us with an imaginative history of his life.

Now an old man, Mungo, the former servant and slave, is being pressed for "heartrending stories of African suffering" by Mr Pringle from the Abolition Committee, who wants to take down a "sober testimony" as propaganda.

Mungo, though, is far too cunning to allow his real history to be appropriated. Instead, he outwits his interlocutor with fabulous tales of his childhood in Africa, his slave-ship passage to England, and his time in service in London as "a celebrity of slum and mansion".

In this contest between Pringle's need for a single, moralising story edited of all extremes, and Mungo's commitment to alternative versions replete with "hysteria, befuddlement, and exaggeration", the author skilfully introduces the prevalent tensions of the day. Yet there is an initial problem here.

As the viewpoint frequently switches between omniscient, third-person, and first-person narrators, often retelling the same event, it's not always clear who's speaking. Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this is a deliberate strategy to suggest the circularity and repetition of oral narratives, the questionable authenticity of early slave narratives — were they ghosted? — and the multiple versions of the truth that can undermine authority.

In other words, there are plenty of loopholes in the story for reader and revisionist alike

He's also richly allusive, invoking the bible, classical mythology, folklore and contemporaneous literature. This resourceful mimicry of his oppressors' tongue again challenges their proprietorial rights, both to language and to his life.

Even though the book is politically-willed, it's far from polemical. The author's imaginative feats see to that. One character, Manu, tries to swim back to Africa but swallows too much water. Now, whenever he tries to speak, "instead of words, fish tumble out, gorgeous and bizarre and dreadful in shape and hue".

But it's not until Mungo arrives in London, a hundred pages in, that the novel really comes to life. With a poet's vision and lightness of touch, Dabydeen recreates the streets of "offal and ash" stalked by all manner of low-life and "children fresh in their filth".

He captures, too, the smells and tastes of the kitchens and coffee-houses, and transfigures lists of food into mouth-watering or stomach-churning fare. What's more, his formidable knowledge of the period is seldom referential; it's rendered unobtrusive by the melody of his prose.

Throughout the novel, we witness the master-slave dynamic at close quarters, and in these tender portraits of damaged souls in union, we are shown their interdependence, role-reversal and even love. Indeed, all the characters are "ensnared" in some way, whether captives of guilt, class, money or insecurity.

Only Mungo has the strength to endure transformation. Dabydeen reserves his finest flourish for Lord and Lady Montague. In a coruscating satire of the upper reaches (or wretches) of society, he dramatises the threat posed to them by the new commercial class, and delightfully ridicules their insistence on affected codes of speech, dress and gesture.

There's a wickedly funny scene symbolising this invasion of the genteel body when a quack-doctor examining Lady Montague "takes a specimen of her bowels with a long-handled silver spoon normally used to serve truffles". Though Moll, the harlot of the title, makes an appearance at the end, the real whore here is commerce and its attendant evils: slavery, avarice, fraud and prostitution.

Whether over-dressed or déshabillé, bodies have become another medium of exchange. Mungo's creative resilience points to an escape-route from such exploitation, and promises a way of "learning to live again".

Like Hogarth, Dabydeen presents his scenes of cruelty and vice in an assured and elegant style, but he goes much further by imbuing his story with a resolute humanity, a warm and defiant sense of compassion and fun.

If you would like to order a copy of *A Harlot's Progress* at the special price of £7.99 (plus 99p p&p), ring the Guardian CultureShop on 0500 600 102.

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