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Eugen Bacon & E Don Harpe

De turtle o' Hades

Abstract:

Like every African dictator, he was confusion's masterpiece— The Telegraph

(August 2003)

'De turtle o' Hades' is a political parable. As an irreverent and playful re-writing of the past, it offers an alternative 'his story' of a brutal dictator of the twentieth century: Idi Amin. The narrative is a parody that plays with the iconic figure of Idi, and ushers the tortoise as a symbol of wisdom in African folklore; in this story its cousin the turtle serves as a transcontinental figure of eternal justice and trickery, a personification as in Brer Terrapin in Uncle Remus stories, the symbol of cunning. The work is partially set in a Southern US aesthetic of bayous and hurricanes, and emerges from collaborative practice between culturally diverse authors.

Biographical notes:

E. Don Harpe has had a varied career, from military service in the 60s to industrial engineering. Harpe is a published Nashville songwriter and a real descendant of the Harpe Brothers, America's First Serial Killers. He has two works of fiction in the Harpe series (*Darkwolf: Unleashed* and *Resurrection: The Rebirth of the Terrible Harpes*); a third is in the making for 2016. The Harpes are infamous in Tennessee and Kentucky, where in the late 1700s the most feared four words along the Wilderness Road were "The Harpes are coming." E. Don Harpe has nearly 40 short stories, including two in the *Twisted Tales II* anthology that won the Eppie Award for best science fiction anthology in 2007. Now retired and living in North Georgia, Harpe devotes his time to Helen, his wife of nearly 50 years, to his children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and to his writing.

Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus - Greenwich University, UK, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. Her arty muse fostered itself within the baroque setting of the Old Royal Naval College, and Eugen found herself a computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing. She is now a PhD candidate in Writing by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University of Technology. Her short story 'A puzzle piece' was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in

Lightship Anthology 3. Eugen's creative work 'Being Marcus', and other works, are published in *New Writing, The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*.

Keywords:

Parody – alternate history – short story – future narrative

ONE CLOUDY NOON in late October, a turtle moseyed past the edge of the Great Swamp and down a mud-cloaked road. He dawdled past rows of trees whose roots the bayou fed living organisms. Here, waters thickened to the colour and texture of sunburnt porridge. Not much of the world had altered since the turtle's hibernation.

Except the diamond trees looked wild as ever and the Jacobean shrubs more rare and serene despite tepid southbound winds that rocked the murky waters. These same winds bore a depraved spirit that made blow flies lose their minds and brought with them the tale of the ashy monster of the bayou—the one that made a toy of the boogie man.

The turtle passed a timber plaque on the way, a sign that led towards—or perhaps had been—Sammy's Chicken Bar and Fried Green Tomatoes. By then, in this part of the swamp, wind had changed and lost its teasing. Now its mood matched that of the rest of the bayou, close to bog land. Tide swept in from the bayou's spirit to slap a coast ravenous for wandering smallies like the two fun-loving girls and a happy dog it had once swallowed whole. The smell was cavernous and green weedy, and it held more than a hint of fish.

The turtle waddled to a ramshackle hut, a single-room cabin that stood feet from the lip of the bayou. It had seen finer days, and was over 70 years old. No fit home for man or beast, someone lived there.

The turtle navigated three steps, seven splinters and nine cracks. Finally! He poked his head past a door, peered into the half-lit room and found chaos and dereliction. And behold, there was the Man. He half-sat, half-slouched on a rocker, a bottle of booze in his hand. The turtle ambled deep into a smell of cabbages or was it feet?

They eyed each other.

The Man spoke first. 'Yew want a drank o' this moonshine?'

'Ain't no moonshine fer me,' said the turtle.

'Well. Ain't got no bourbon fer yew, or any o' dat fine liquor,' the Man said.

'All dat's none o' my thang,' said the turtle.

'Ah be danged to know yore thang. What's yore name, turtle,' the Man said. 'Ole Andy wants to know yore name.'

'If yore name's Ole Andy, ah ain't no turtle.'

'Who might ah be den, turtle?'

'Who yew are ain't who yew used to be. Call yerself Ole Andy, er something else. Call yerself whatever yew need to. Feel dem jitters slipping up on yew?'

'Ain't got no jitters. What yew say yore name is turtle?'

'My name is Doc, don't yew go calling me turtle,' he said. 'Most folks just calls me Doc.'

'Doc, huh,' old Andy said. 'Where yew from, Mister Doc green turtle?'

'Ovah in de black water,' said Doc. 'Born and bred ovah dere. Used to have a fambily ovah dere, but dey's all gone. Most o' dem is turtle soup now, else dey's grounded up fer one er de udder o' Miz Marie's potions.'

'Did yew come here fer something, Doc, to tell ole Andy something mabbe. Er just to discuss how cruel life has been fer yore fambily?'

'Ah gots something to tell yew, all right, dats a fact. But ah don't know as how yew is ready just yet fer to hear de news. Might just strike yew down where yew's standing.'

'Now dat we's all agreed on yore name, Doc Turtle, what might you be thinking about mine? My true identity?'

Doc Turtle did not reply. He did a crawl around the potbellied stove that the Man used to ward off October evening chill at dark. He wondered how a man once so potent could live in such squalor.

'Dis ole house,' he wondered aloud those thoughts. 'Dis house in Louisiana, she a whole lot different from what yew is used to, ain't she?' A couch, its hide worn out and faded, rested its back against the wall. Beside it, a scarred wooden table sufficient for the Man to take his meals. 'Yew been chowing on cabbage?'

'Danged right—cabbage. Yew got something fancy fer me, like turtle soup mabbe?' said the Man.

The turtle smiled. He peered around the stove and saw a grimed and cracked old mirror hung on one wall, a hot plate set on a sideboard by the wall; aside from them and the rocker the old man sat in, no other furnishings claimed space.

'Ain't she a lot different?' Doc Turtle looked at the Man.

'Dat she is, bro, dat she is,' ole Andy said. 'But ah gets by. Don't need much, ole Andy don't, and ain't none keen on company coming to call. So ah just sets here, watching de swamp critters such as yew, and knowing one fine morn ah won't be waking up. Ah sets here thinking back and knowing ah is satisfied wif what ah done wif my life.'

'Don't yew miss all dem fancy cigars and sweet wine?' said the turtle. He gazed at a scuffed and half worn boot that rested haphazardly against the wall near the couch. 'And dem all fine women wid de red lips and de big breasts?'

'Ah gots to admit sometimes ole Andy, he misses dat stuff. But not de cigars or de wine, and shorely not dem fancy ladies.' He snorted twice, large hurried gusts of air from his nose passing for laughter. 'But I miss de power. De *power*, Doc, dat's all. Holding a man's life right here in de palm o' my hand, snuffing it out wif one snap o' my fingers.' He paused for a moment of reflection, snapped his fingers loudly, and for the first time in perhaps years, a smile played at corners of his lips. 'Yessir, ah miss dat, ah shorely does.'

The turtle continued his trek around the room, this time stopping to examine twenty or thirty \$50 bills scattered on the floor near the table. Judging from the layer of dust on the bills it was not today or yesterday that the dust devil came skittering across the

room, depositing the green paper about on the floor with no regard to its usefulness. The turtle knew old Andy had no need for money, and wouldn't waste energy to get on his knees to pick it up.

'Don' yew worry dat de young bloods from town will come calling out here to yore shack? Dat deys come in here and rob yew?' he asked. 'Mabbe even kill yew and leave yer bones fer de swamp to take care of?'

Old Andy snorted his laughter again.

'Dey's scared o' ole Andy,' he said. 'Dey not be coming out here fer no reason.'

'What makes de bloods scared of an ole man like yew?'

'Dey thinking dat ole Andy, he might be turning dem into spiders er frogs er some udder little ole swamp critter,' Andy replied. 'Dey knows it'll be dem what gets hurt, so dey keeps de distance. Good thing too, cos ah still gots tricks up de ole raggedy sleeves. Enough to handle a few bloods if dey gets froggy enough to hop ovah here.'

'Well, dat's good,' the turtle said. 'No call fer younguns to treat ole peoples dat rough.'

'Yessir, ah reckon.' Andy eased his bare foot out in front of the turtle, stopping his forward movement. 'What yew want, Doc?' he said. 'What yew want wif ol' Andy?'

Doc paused for a moment, then looked into the face of the Man.

'Ah've come to tell yew very distinct dat it's time fer yew to be going home,' he said.

Ole Andy looked at Doc for a moment. He stared out through the open door, and saw in his mind a time and place distant from the swamp shack.

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Summer: 1975

Uniformed in creased trousers and a blouse complete with the Victoria Cross, the self-proclaimed Field Marshall determined he would now be President for Life.

He issued a proclamation to the people and sat on his throne. He nodded and waved as he was borne up and carried through the city by the people he would govern. Men bowed. Women cast flowers as he passed. He snapped his fingers at a person, and the nearest soldier drew a bayonet and stabbed the person to death.

He snapped his fingers often.

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4 July 1976.

Gunfire, commandos, a rescue of passengers from a commercial jet forced to land in Entebbe. Israeli hostages freed.

As for the President for life ...

He was extremely upset. How dare foreigners come into his country? This was *his* business, and he was more than capable of taking care of it! 58 minutes after the raid's

onset, the plane was gone. Only two dead and a grandmother left behind. The President for Life railed against any suspect, including 200 highly placed officials and the grandmother from the plane.

The President for Life walked onto a balcony above the plaza where they were herded.

'Let this be a lesson,' he intoned. 'No one collaborates with a raiding party of outsiders to make a mockery of my government, without paying a price. History bears witness to how I deal with rebellion.'

He pointed to the Captain of the Guard and snapped his fingers. Cries, overcome by roars of many guns. As the President regarded the carnage, something nudged his foot. It was a saucer sized turtle, so out of place and yet so familiar.

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'Going home, am ah?' Andy said. 'I knowed yew was no ordinary turtle.' He released the bottle of moonshine. It clattered to the weatherboard floor and, because the floor was slanted, rolled until it hit a foot of the sideboard. 'Yew say it's time ole Andy be going home. Do yew mean back across de water, er do yew mean home as in Andy ain't gone be on dis ole mud ball no more?'

'Ah think yew knows de answer to dat, Andy. But lemme assure yew some ocean is gonna git crossed. By yew and me both, all right.'

'Well sir. I'm ready, I reckon. Gots a few things to do first, tidy up a bit, but that won't take long. No sir, not long.'

'What yew gots to do, Andy?' Doc said. 'Ain't like yew gots de big fambily to say goodbye to, yew ate 'em.'

'Reckon yer right about dat speculation, Doc,' Andy said, 'Ah ates dem. If yew had donkey brained women and chillum like mine, yew would have ated dem. But ah does has one person ah gots to make peace wif, if dat's all right wif yew.'

'Ah ain't got nothing but time, ole Andy,' Doc said. 'Doc's got nothing but time. Jus' wondering as to who yew gonna try and get to forgive yew? God ain't in no mood fer it, yew done turned yer back on him mighty big. Took liberties wif his word.'

'Don't yew reckon as to how God would forgive ole Andy if ah asked him real nice? Seems ah recall reading in de book how he would.'

'Dat's in de book, shore enough,' Doc said. 'But yew done took too many eyes fer eyes, too many bites o' dat forbidden fruit, too many snaps o' yer fingers. Ain't no God gone overlook dat.'

Andy shook his head. 'Reckon yer right, Doc green turtle, but it don't matter none noways. Ain't God ah be wanting to talk to. Can be no peace tween de two o' us, cause don't neither o' us want it.'

'Den who yew needing to be confessing to?'

'Ain't got but one person to talk to,' he said. 'Ah gots to try and find a way to tell myself goodbye.'

'Get on wif it den,' Doc said.

Andy mumbled to himself for the better part of half an hour. Sometimes he went silent, sometimes he cried out loud. Sometimes he laughed and now and again he shed tears, but in the end none of it mattered.

Together, they moved to the centre of the room.

Doc swayed his head.

Before Andy's astonishment could turn to alarm, a gust of wind beat his face, squeezed new tears from his eyes. His life danced before him. Milton Obote, conqueror of Sir Edward Mutesa, slipped into a field of maize, his fallen government at his tail, as rebel troops sealed off Entebbe. Curfew, courts martial, examples made of traitors: live burials; village guillotines; boiling oil; crocs in the Tana River. Beggars, Indians, dissenters – all traitors – as much as Julius Kambarage Nyerere and his Tanzanians!

Andy saw Israeli hostages (oh, such joy!), then their rescue (rats!). He saw thirty mistresses, twenty children, one by one eaten to bone. He saw national debt, accusation, paranoia! Nyerere, the skunk! Libya, Jeddah, edge of The Great Swamp, USA.

Doc swayed his head even more. His eyes turned keen, hypnotic.

The Man tumbled to the floor, clutched his neck. He couldn't breathe, breathe, breathe!

Doc stilled his swaying.

The wind died.

The Man still lay on the floor, not in bedraggled garments and rubber thongs made of old tyre, but in paraphernalia, his old former royal self. His boots were buffed to a high polish. The medals on his breast shone like stars.

He rose, tested his heels, then stamped out a drill. He was ready to inspect the troops. He straightened, snapped his feet, lifted a hand to a salute.

Poised, he and Doc stepped out the door into a swirl of wind.

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They flapped from a hurricane, crashed into a moonlit field full of golden maize. The Man regarded the rolling hills of corn and wondered if the East African Rail and the 50-story buildings of his reign had thrived. He refused to help Doc Turtle from his backside, from his feet up landing, and watched him rock himself to position.

They searched for the Royal City, through Jinja, Entebbe, all the way to Kampala. The Man was unable to swallow disbelief at the New Luganda and its immaculate cities, white-washed and sparkling or bejewelled in marble and white gold. Instead of cars on the roads, air shuttles of stainless steel, double glazed glass or platinum

whistled overhead. He searched for a hint of squalor, of corruption, of street dogs, of vagrant beggars, and found none. Instead there was order, Medtronic centres, Braille libraries, spinal tap clinics, even Family First clinics and health spas. The New Luganda was not a country at war. Its buildings spiralled to the sky and glinted like diamonds. One building of pure glass and windows of crystal was shaped like the wings of a butterfly. Citizens fearless of the new soldier and his turtle simply wondered and were amused. They called him Soldier Turtle.

A peasant at the edge of the city stopped processing millet with an automatic grinder outside her hut that resembled a tree-like structure with branches made of shiny green, material that blinked with strobe lighting. The Man nearly fell in astonishment. She cared to break cake with him (frosty-iced *cake*, not bread!), no recognition in her eyes. The Man broke into tears. Didn't she know who he was? he asked.

She shook her head.

They walked past children in a marble-glazed football field, progenies who were *not* learning the art of connecting a foot to an elusive ball but dang!, were practicing a new brand of dance the Man had never seen. The music to which their bodies shimmied like bonefree puppets did not have songs in sweet Kakwa, his mother tongue; this music *zhinged!* and *zhanged!* and gave him a headache.

At the emerald lake, the Man and Doc beheld the Victoria. It was not murky like the bayou turned to bog outside the hut they had left behind. The waters were not infested with crocs that once lunged at prisoners condemned to death.

At the pink diamond palace, the Man demanded audience with the leader. Guards gazed at his regalia, at the turtle on his shoulder, and were so amused their eyes watered.

'Ah demand to see Milton, dat scoundrel, real dawg. Danged polecat stoles my country, plucked it under my foots. Ah darned well wants my nation back!'

Someone pointed out that Milton Obote was no longer in power; it was Emperor Museveni now. And they heckled him, turtle and all, away from the palace.

The Man roamed the streets of New Luganda. He told anyone who listened, the people of Luganda, that he was the Man, the *real Man* not an imposter. Some laughed and slapped him on his back; others pelted him with tomatoes. He lost Doc Turtle god-knows-where, and very nearly lost his mind.

One day, forlorn and hungry, he saw the diamond crusted Regal Shuttle, a Diner plane, all glazed and blinking, on a slow glide overhead. It was the Emperor's shuttle. Sapphire head and taillights indicated a foreign visitor of import. The Man caught glimpse of a silver-haired Nyerere, the nitwit, that dawg who had deposed him. President Nyerere sat beside Emperor Museveni.

What first was a glance out the window, the bedraggled man on the streets understood, became a flutter of recognition, then Nyerere turned away. The Man recalled the dishonour of years ago, moments before his ousting from power, when Nyerere's troops goaded the Man with Swahili songs of apocalypse:

Alikiona kizimba cha moto! / He saw a blast of fire!

Kilichomtoa nyoka pangoni mwake! / That scuttled the snake from his den!

As the shuttle rocketed into the horizon, Nyerere held something up against the gleaming window before the shuttle vanished into the sun. It was Doc Green Turtle, dang scoundrel, now sojourning with the Emperor and his guests.

The Man stared until there was no more to see.

The song of apocalypse grew loud, louder in his ears:

Nyoka pangoni mwake! / The snake from his den!

Alikiona kizimba cha moto! / He saw a blast of fire!

As he roamed the streets, the loudness in his ears became unbearable. He crouched, put hands to his head and rocked until the singing silenced. He gathered empty tins of Cowboy ghee, discarded and futureless, clanked them and heard no sound. So he tied them to his ankles.

The Man faced the sun, shielded his eyes from its fire, and set one foot before the other in a slow march to eternal anonymity.

Research statement

Research background

Collaborations in works of fiction are like ghost writing without fishing out the DNA. Gail Bell writes: 'We pilgrims cannot behave like forensic investigators at a scene; we cannot even test the bounce of the bed or the weight of an inkwell. At best, we are left to sniff the air and ponder.' (2010: 16) The focus of this research is on writerly collaboration in historical fiction, where each writer comes with their own knowledge, their own biases, to pilgrim into the past.

Research contribution

This short story explores diversity and writerly biases in collaborative works that come with their own paradoxes. Counterfactual history, suggests Kathleen Singles, contributes to our 'understanding of the uses, problems, and paradoxes of postulating alternative outcomes to past events' (2013: 2). The writers' diversity engenders uniqueness to this collaboration. The narrative transposes multiple meanings into 'writing the ghost train': it offers the reader a remake of history; it diversifies form (cross-genre narrative) and authorship (narratology)—the way in which we put stories together; it tricks the reader into the reality of the created world through props of storytelling (characterisation, voice, point of view etc.), but on close inspection it manifests the phantoms of Harpe and Bacon—their voices, reflections and biases.

Research significance

De turtle o' Hades takes history's exemplar and recontextualises it into an imaginative piece birthed from two culturally and geographically diverse writers. The work has been accepted for publication in a reputable refereed journal.

List of works cited

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