The Persistence of Memory: A Novel
by Tony Eprile

Always warm-hearted, sometimes comic, ultimately damning.—J. M. Coetzee
I was enthralled by [Tony Eprile's] gorgeous prose, his genius for transforming pain into art, and not least, by the fiercely comic gift of his unforgettable, and unforgetting, narrator, writes Margot Livesey about this long-awaited first novel. Eprile fuses a searing political and cultural satire with a haunting coming-of-age story to render South Africa's turbulent past with striking clarity. Paul Sweetbread—cursed with a perfect memory in a country where amnesia is endemic—reflects on his traumatic past: a doting mother plucked from a Chekhov play, authoritarian schoolteachers who spouted the government's version of history, and the violence lurking beneath the civilized Jewish world of Johannesburg in the twilight of apartheid. As the novel builds to a harrowing conclusion, Sweetbread, a veteran of the secret war in Angola and Namibia, is forced to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with astonishing results.

My Personal Review:
South Africa from 1968 - 2000 is revealed in all its cultural variety and internal stresses through the life story of Paul Sweetbread, an overweight Jewish boy who is an outsider to everyone. Neither a Boer nor an Englishman, he is also not really a Jew, since his family has never been observant, leaving him without any common roots that connect him to his Caucasian countrymen. A person with a photographic memory, he is, from the outset, a victim of his memory. Because he can quote from his schoolbooks exactly, teachers think he cheats; his fellow students torment him.

As he sets the scene and creates a fully drawn personality for Paul, the author recreates his early school and home life, his relationships with black servants, and his family history, including the death of his father. The action intensifies when Paul, having finished school in 1987, joins the South African Defense Force for two years, instead of going to college. South Africa is nervously protecting its borders against what it believes are
communist insurgents, while also facing threats from within. Apartheid has been challenged, the British and Boers are at odds, and African nationalism is growing.

Pauls wartime experiences, recreated in stunning detail, further develop his character as he observes Captain Lyddie, The perfect specimen of South African manhood, engaging in racial brutality, described in passages of great power which embed themselves in Pauls perfect memory and in the readers. The battle for survival of South Africa and the changes which will be necessary as the country changes from white to black rule are ever at the forefront of the novel. Pauls empathy for the Bushmen, whom the SADF uses as trackers, is palpable, while his fear, engendered during a photo assignment in a black township, reflects his awareness of the dangers from within.

Thoughtful and challenging but filled with wry humor, Epriles novel presents events from Paul Sweetbreads life slowly, sometimes deliberately omitting important information in order to maintain suspense and let the reader come to know Paul through his life and actions, rather than through background information. He creates a sympathetic picture of an extremely sensitive young man who finds himself in impossible situations which mark him for life. His philosophical musings near the end of the book about memory and metaphor raise important questions about society and national memory, how a country constructs its memories of the past in order to make it acceptable, and careful readers will savor the language and sheer intelligence of Epriles observations. Mary Whipple

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