

Once More Into the Fray

Burridge Unbound, Alan Cumyn. McClelland & Stewart, 2000.

In his previous novel, *Man of Bone*, Alan Cumyn took his readers on a descent into hell with his protagonist, Bill Burridge, a Canadian diplomat on assignment in the southeast Asian island nation of Santa Irene. Burridge is taken hostage in Santa Irene by a rebel group called the Kartouf, held for nine months and subjected to unspeakable acts of psychological and physical torture. The novel ends with Burridge's rescue and his return to Canada, a shell of his former self, embittered by his experience, his faith in himself and in the fundamental decency of his species profoundly shaken. In these pages I referred to *Man of Bone* as "a novel of transcendent humanity."

Cumyn has now written a sequel to *Man of Bone*. Entitled *Burridge Unbound*, the new novel picks up the story two years after Burridge's release. He is still re-covering from his ordeal, but in the initial chapters we learn that crucial events have occurred. Burridge has written an account of his kidnap and torture, which has gained him an international reputation as a survivor. He has established his own human rights organization, its mission to expose the acts that brutal regimes inflict upon their own people. Yet despite a full schedule and an active life, he remains a physical wreck who must rely upon a paid nurse in order to make it through the meetings and public appearances that attend his celebrity. The intense level of care he requires has proven too heavy a burden for his wife to bear, and he now lives alone in an apartment high above the city of Ottawa, his caregiver never more than a phone call away.

The event that provides the catalyst for the novel's main action is the assassination of General Linga Minitzh, the dictator whose corrupt regime has held absolute power in Santa Irene for more than twenty years. Burridge is transfixed by accounts of the assassination and its aftermath that appear on the Internet. It soon appears that two factions are emerging, each led by

former Minitzh henchmen, that will eventually face off and battle it out for power. But then a saviour appears, in the form of the widow of an opposition leader dead almost twenty years. Suli Nylioko, whose husband Jono, leader of the outlawed Democratic Coalition, was murdered by security forces, earlier returned to the land of her birth and against the odds founded the Freedom Party. As the standoff continues, Nylioko emerges as the people's choice to lead a new government, one that will undertake to heal the wounds of the past and guide the beleaguered citizens of Santa Irene into a new era.

BurrIDGE follows the shifting tide of events from Ottawa. He regards himself as an outsider, hardly a player on the main world stage. Life makes demands, and he cannot give the situation in Santa Irene his full attention. He wants desperately to become more closely involved in raising his son, and he has not given up hope that someday he will resume a normal relationship with his wife Maryse. Into this mix comes Joanne, his nurse, his aide, a beautiful and capable young woman who has spent much of her life fleeing one relationship after another. Ashamed of a reduced physical state that often leaves him humiliated and dependent, humbled by the impotence that has plagued him since his release, he is nevertheless attracted to her, though he realizes it is in all likelihood an impossibly one-sided attraction.

Then he is summoned to the office of the Santa Irenian ambassador, where he is formally invited to serve on the Truth Commission being formed by the new government. Initially outraged by the offer, then perplexed, BurrIDGE searches his heart for reasons why he should, or should not, serve. Finally, against the advice of his wife and those closest to him, he takes up the offer. This is how he comes to return to the scene of his suffering.

Bill BurrIDGE's tale is a complex one, full of ghosts and agonizing memories that mingle in his mind with the life he is currently living. As in *Man of Bone*, BurrIDGE narrates his own story, and the reader is never permitted far from the intimate realm of his consciousness. In many respects he is still suffering a reign of terror. He is beset by fears (of the dark, of enclosed spaces) and tormented by any sensation (a taste, an odour) that recalls his period of captivity. More crucial to our understanding of his motives, however, is the anger that boils up from within his damaged psyche, anger that often seems wildly out of proportion to the event that sparked it. Resentful that so much has been taken from him and dissatisfied with what remains, he sometimes comes across as simply peevish and bad-tempered. Again and again he lets fly a cutting remark that alienates the very people upon whose good will he depends.

In Santa Irene BurrIDGE takes his place on the Truth Commission and listens to testimony from those who suffered at the hands of security forces and from soldiers who were unwilling to defy the orders they received. As is often the case when a country finally casts off the shackles of totalitarian rule,

once a new regime takes control the chain of command that set the horrific events into motion vanishes. Those who formerly wielded the heavy hand of power have shed their responsibilities along with their uniforms and merged with the general population.

At a certain point the Truth Commission begins raising more questions than it is able to answer, and here the narrative whips into high gear in the manner of a political thriller. There are bodies and clandestine meetings, a disclosure of horrors, tense confrontations and an ongoing threat of violence. Through it all, Cumyn emphasizes the humanity of his protagonist and provides a sympathetic portrait of Suli Nylioko, a paradoxical figure whose position as leader of her country is hardly secure. When the dangers threatening the new regime finally emerge from the shadows and the action briskly approaches a messy, catastrophic climax, Burridge learns that not as much has changed in Santa Irene as he would like to think.

With sequels, comparisons are impossible to avoid, and *Burridge Unbound* does not quite match *Man of Bone* for suspense and unadorned human drama. A few episodes feel contrived and occasionally we sense the author's hand at work. Finally, there comes a moment when Burridge himself ceases to matter, when the personal aspects of his story take a back seat to unfolding events. For the second time he survives the hellish confines of Santa Irene. But when he finally arrives home in the midst of a family crisis, the turmoil of his emotions somehow seems beside the point.

But these are minor caveats. With this book (a finalist for the 2000 Giller Prize) Alan Cumyn confirms his reputation as an adept stylist and a gifted storyteller. *Burridge Unbound* is an accomplished novel distinguished by depth of characterization, a poised and often lyrical voice, and unflagging powers of invention, features it shares with the other three novels Cumyn has published since 1993. This impressive body of work — all of it powerful, troubling, and profoundly affecting — confronts the human condition head-on, blending darkness and light, humour and pathos.

Ian Colford
Halifax, Nova Scotia