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THE HANGING TREE

By David Lambkin

Counterpoint; 400 pp.

Explaining that his early influences included not only writers but painters and composers, Hemingway noted that what novelists can learn by studying counterpoint is too obvious even to mention.

As if to make that lesson still more obvious, South African David Lambkin braids around his central theme of love, jealousy and violence three plots, each echoing the others, each illustrating that "we're not fallen angels. we're risen apes." Lambkin even gets heavy-handed enough to make several major characters amateur string musicians with a passion for Bach, and he has another character theorize: "What if the whole cosmos is a fugue; six, a dozen, two dozen, a million intertwined melodies all dancing together in unison...a tumble of horizontal melody that flies headlong toward resolution?"

That's the sort of theory that would appeal to paleontologist Kathryn Widd, the alternately vibrant and melancholy narrator. Scarred physically by a near-fatal snake bite and emotionally by two searing youthful love affairs, from her Johannesburg museum Kathryn examines fossils and enduring questions, like "What does it mean to be human?" and "Why do we kill each other?"

Her professional and personal quests take a crucial turn when she's handed photographs from Kenya of a fossil skull, millions of years old, possibly an ancestor of humans, and bearing two mysterious indentations above the left eyebrow. It may be nothing special. Or it may be the first murder victim.

Kathryn sets off for the Kenyan desert with research director Ray Chinta, administrator Victor Macmillan, and Macmillan's dazzling but self-indulgent wife Marion, "one of those pampered women...who complain about the heat or cold simply to make men feel nervously guilty that they're unable to control the weather."

Kathryn's guard up against men, it is less prepared for women, and soon Marion seduces her into an erotic love affair. And not much later, Marion's infuriated husband figures the infidelity out.

Kathryn has by then become intrigued by another love triangle, based on historical fact, that occurred in the same location in 1908. Then, the famed John Henry Patterson (whose *The Maneaters of Tsavo* forms the basis for the 1996 film *The Ghost and the Darkness*) led an aristocrat and his voluptuous wife on an expedition that eventually resulted in the aristocrat's death by bullet wound, the death ruled a suicide.

All the while, painstaking excavation and lab tests reveal that Kathryn's fossil is 4.5 million years old, the first hominid, who died embracing a woman he apparently bludgeoned to death, possibly out of sexual jealousy, a discovery thrilling in its significance but heartbreaking to Kathryn who suspects it means humanity may be inherently violent.

As the plots interweave, Lambkin introduces ancillary characters who emblemize metaphysical forces: the dashing adventurer Tregallion, with whom Kathryn will fall in love, with a St. Francis-like awareness of his kinship with all living things, "as though he intuits his unity with the whole cosmos through the intimacy he feels when he's in the bush," and the demonic Sister Mary, who tries to tempt people toward death.

Originally published last year in South Africa, the novel is propelled from the start by spiritual yearning and intellectual weight, a novel of palpable mass. Not everything works smoothly. Lambkin gets pedantic in his blatant allusions to Shakespeare's great tragedies and Eliot's Quartets, and the Patterson romance more than nods to "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." His seams where history, quantum mechanics, necromancy and passion meet can stretch too far, and there's a kind of emotional as well as verbal maximalism when Lambkin introduces spectral visitations or tries too hard to make sex sound beatific.

But sometimes a writer's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a Pulitzer for. If Lambkin occasionally gets a tad baroque, he more than compensates with not one but three gripping plots, fastidious research, chilling tension and a superbly evoked African setting. He's made this one very tough book to put down.