

RUNNERS

Also by John Fraser
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Black Masks
The Magnificent Wurlitzer
The Red Tank

RUNNERS

John Fraser

*'.... we run because we like it
Through the broad bright land.'*

Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895–1915)
The Song of the Ungirt Runners



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Oxford

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Preface

DEATH, in all types of political regimes, is usually the only tool that scrapes politicians off the scene. Politics may be a dirty business, but once you have played in the mud, you can't survive in anything else – and when then prise your finders off the power, there are still the books, the lectures, the reminiscences, the fresh dirt on friends and colleagues.

Runners runs towards a kind of utopia, a story of the exceptional – if only at the finish. The chief 'runner', the leader and protagonist of the story, may be a distant descendant of Machiavelli's Prince but this is very much a creation for our times.

Some elected leaders – though election may not mean so much – progress from modest rags to fine ones, small riches to the larger. Although this

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‘Boss’, this ‘I’, is truly a monster, he also has a rare, enlightened side. Where others leaders cling to power, he runs – but instead of running *for* office, he runs *from* office.

The story is set in that scrap of territory that lies between South and Central America where the narrator hero – let’s call him **I** – bought a modest office: that of deputy mayor. **I** is caught in a shootout, and would take the rap for a muddled massacre – militia, villagers and the indigenous – the ‘guys in feathers’. He escapes, along with his counsellor Shapur, Sara the lady spy, Rick the celebrity thug, and Lili the athlete, his designated successor – a fine runner.

Impoverished, they flee and room together. **I** seeks Enlightenment – a course with food included – and he buys it with the help of a borrowed credit card. He gets lucky on the virtual horses, and so the group can fly away to somewhere new. His plane, newly bought, fails to deliver them where they might want to go. He has landed somewhere

in Africa, leader of a misty opposition, under house – or, rather, ship – arrest.

There, he cultivates the President, and his garden too, a dark paradise. He is infused with guilt and impatience; oversees the killing of his selfless friend, and wants to leave. Too many poor, sick people. Lili shows that although you have the democratic right to keep your clothes on, it is fun to take them off to make a powerful friend, and runs a nude Olympic race with the President. Sara, the lady spy, helps them to move back home.

Back home, **I** wins election, starts to implement a radical programme, with a nationalist flavour. It is frustrating, if not contradictory. Not only will the guys in feathers, the indigenous, be abandoned, but the visionary workers too will be disappointed. They start their own movement, the Galleon, in which he recognises his own dreams.

At an international conference, some goons try to put their expenses on his tab. **I** is fed up with the whole set-up. He runs, he keeps his pride, but runs. His counsellor and his media expert – they will

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stay on and serve and trim. Lili will become the next boss, and Rick will find more thuggish things to do.

I, our hero, has run for office, run to escape bullets, poverty and reprisals, raced with runners – run in every mode of running, and in the end, runs off the page of history, pursued by horsemen, former allies.

This is enlightenment, is the fantasy.

Running to Enlightenment

Although I, the protagonist, has no sense of rules, moral or otherwise, he has a sense of guilt – which for him passes for responsibility. He seeks a course in Enlightenment, in ‘casting light’ or ‘seeing clear’, not morality. His is a sense that political election is a bond of companionship – even when subsequently he is led, by frustration, opportunism, nastiness, to subscribe to violence and

compromise. He authorises the shooting which kills his friend, true peacemaker. One sees the guilt spring from the sight of bodies ‘doing the *pizzica*’ (a Southern Italian dance, from the Salento), in a massacre for which he has no direct responsibility (‘I’m not elected’).

And, later, there is recognition of a deeper, radical humanity in his sense of comradeship with the Galleon – the proletarians who know, for instance that nationalisation does not give them ownership of common goods, still less power over their own existences, which is held by generals and institutions which don’t recognise them, still less their dream of a happy land. We notice too that this happy land would not acknowledge the ‘guys in feathers’, the indigenous peoples, shuttled over frontiers.

The stereotypes are easily recognisable – the crumbling Africa, the celebrities – Lili, the beautiful runner, Rick the celebrity bully – because power deals in, creates and tolerates, the superficialities, just such stereotypes. The

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‘President’ is just another monster, quite a benevolent one, presiding cheerfully above his realm of poor, sick people. Shapur, eternal trimmer, counsellor, Pliny the journalist-philosopher, political weathervane – they are stock figures because stock figures drive this machine. Sara, the lady spy, American – ubiquitous, because reality places her in every continent and every transformation – we recognise her not by her character, but by the smell, tobacco, and her transportation.

The story begins with an innocent visit to look at pictures – and here too aesthetics are significant. The violence in the pictures sets the scene for the massacre that follows. The installation in the peat is part of an international industry, with globalised manpower. The private art, on the other hand, curated with love, is in the garden – a garden in the dark, home to fantastic creatures – the vulnerable blind white monkeys, inserted and, in the light of power and action, deserted.

The ship – which recalls the breakers’ yards in India and Africa – serves as a prison, real for the real dissenters, and half jail, half refuge for the faked dissent of ‘loyal opposition’, but it is also the one place where creation, unmediated by power and industry, can enjoy its brief life. In the dark.

In the end, I’s trajectory has not engaged with other people, his drive is quite self-directed; he makes no claim to being valuable to others, or to projects and ideas. Consistently, then, he’s his own judge, and his enlightenment lies in running one more time, to keep his self-esteem – and, no doubt, another layer of guilt, ambition and regret. This makes him exceptional, unique. Though quite an ordinary monster without qualities, his flawed integrity distinguishes him from all his colleagues and his peers.

A Postmodern Prince

Runners may be regarded as a contemporary *re-run*, a remake of Machiavelli's Prince, with a sideways glance at Gramsci's 'Modern Prince' – the revolutionary party. The real old-style Prince is the 'African' president. The Machiavellian fortune is a woman, so you must beat and chivvy her to master her: *virtù* is demonstrated in war, but it's electronic horses who do the fortune-seeking, and **I** is adverse to combat. Even the *condottiere* in search of a state in which to be the Prince has his counterpart in the random search in the waged aeroplane for a place to land.

The 'party' (Gramsci's Modern Prince) is the four of them, and, in a whirl of Machiavelli plus Gramsci, the complex relations of Party to Society are manifested in real 'partying', in Lili's freak circus, in Pliny's tabloids – and rather than the classical search for consensual power which conceals the cunning of the ruler, *Runners*

proposes a search for enlightenment which sends the postmodern prince running off.

Runners contains many themes: the complicity between leaders, the nature of political friendships and loyalties, the contradictions between leaders and electors, democratic rhetoric and practice, base and leadership, and between different elements in the base (the urban and the feathered); the volatility and adaptability of leaders; and the motivations of the leaders, in this case I's fear of poverty (hence the weight of the letter from his 'friend'), his skill and lack of scruples in securing cash and in the end renouncing it, though being driven by desire, not need, of money. There is also the pursuit of justice in the personal, incongruous instance; the machismo of political culture.

Regarding Gramsci's Modern Prince, in the popularist epoch, war and poverty are two of the horsemen rather underplayed by the Master. As for Machiavelli's Prince and the notion that 'fortune is a woman', to be mastered with determination – in *Runners*, the woman is not mastered, is not exactly

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the ‘woman of destiny’ but just good at running (running stands both for coming first, beating the others, and also for running away, escaping) and the designated successor, designated not by opposite will but by the Prince’s counsellor: – and ‘fortune’ is luck: on the horses in particular. Machiavelli’s *virtù* in the Prince, exemplified by the study of war as the supreme task and test of the Prince, is studiously avoided by the hero of *Runners*, and maybe his chief virtue (or cowardice).

Maybe Machiavelli’s Prince was an ironic warning against the monsters, the princes, though certainly complicit with one – so too *Runners* is an ironic study (better, a sarcastic study) of a modern prince, who is a master of quite fortuitous luck (horses, pilots), and devoid of the traditional *virtù* – but with the supreme quality of running away.

Gramsci’s Modern Prince is, of course, the party (the Party) with all its complex connections to society. Individualism is merely ‘apoliticism’, the ‘leader’ just a *dépassé* rather miserable figure

(so much for Joseph Stalin!). Runners takes this up obliquely but in timely fashion the modern prince is decidedly individual(ist) – here as runner is the ‘new leader’, the modern prince, squalid maybe but also in a way successful; self-critical – and more so than contemporaries who come to mind.

I sees further and more clearly what can and should be done (and won’t be): and how and when to scuttle off, having done it, however little. The fun point is that – if he’s squalid and rather pitiful, where does that leave the other non-ideal princes who accomplish less with more resources and still plug on . . . ?

And of course, it all assumes that the Modern Prince, the Party, was and is a wholly literary creation.

J. M. Machette

1 Runners in Training

LOOKING AT pictures (escorted by armed men).
The wise athletic fish leaps, and topples down the fisherman. We move along. From the millstones, tiny warriors in blue armour spill out.

Someone nearby is playing ping-pong. There is perfect peace. I can see the plantations through the plate glass, too stuffed with sun they seem, the plants can't nod with no wind – but the filtered scent is lulling. Midsummer. Satyrs, druggy decadence, and peace – for this slice of time – is perfect.

The ping-pong's more insistent, and my counsellor, Shapur, says, 'Get the fuck down!' – we're all sprawl each other, a kind of terrified orgy – me and Shapur, the lady spy, Lili, and

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Rick who will succeed me. A fine quintet, end of act one, all horizontal.

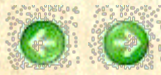
‘Some guy is popping at us’ – maybe the guy that’s grown those too green plants, the flowers already on the edge of rot. It’s someone else’s territory, or even faith, a state in travail. We’re pinned down, and then we hear the helicopter, and we think ‘we’re saved’, but no, it’s rattled off. It’s like those solitary wasplike things, so finicky about their nesting, just buzz around, out on house hunts.

When we’ve all settled down again, our situation’s bad. Wrong orders given, guys get killed – I only bought this job, I’m not elected, just got lucky with the cards. I’m the one responsible for all the guys that’s killed, but not responsible for being killed.

We scuttle out. Sara, the lady spy, has brought her hammered car, her Hummer, a military look, no windows and no armour. We all jump in, the pictures in the show have left us with their violence, not tranquillity – the fish, the mill.

John Fraser

We're all scared stupid. Our paid friends, with guns, have left.



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