

Add to entry on ALEX LA GUMA:

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Alex La Guma  
(20 February 1925-11 October 1985)

Cecil A. Abrahams  
Bishop's University

BOOKS

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*Between 1956 and 1985*

Since ~~1957~~<sup>1</sup> Alex La Guma ~~has~~ produced ~~fourteen~~<sup>more than a dozen</sup> short stories, five novels,

and a travel book on the Soviet Union. In addition, he ~~has written~~<sup>wrote</sup> numerous

essays on the political struggle in South Africa and edited a collection of

writings on apartheid. His work ~~has been~~<sup>was</sup> translated into twenty languages,

demonstrating the value of his creative contributions. As a creative writer

and political activist, he ~~has been~~<sup>was</sup> honoured by many national governments.

As a creative writer who addressed the central questions of life in South

Africa, he ~~has~~<sup>g</sup> established himself as an important literary figure both in

Africa and in the rest of the world.

Alex La Guma was born on 20 February 1925 in Cape Town, South Africa.

In a country tragically plagued by racism, he grew up in the Cape coloured

(mixed race) District Six. Not only did he learn of racism early in his

life, but he also grew accustomed to the poverty which most children of his

race experienced. Since his father was active both in the fledgling union

movement and the newly-found<sup>ed</sup> South African Communist Party, the young Alex was introduced early to the ~~burning~~<sup>important political</sup> issues of the day and learned to do without his father's presence at home. He attended Upper Ashley primary school and later did his secondary training at Trafalgar school. He did not complete his studies because he was interested in the fight against fascism in Spain and in the Second World War. Rejected as a volunteer in both wars, he found labouring jobs in a furniture company and at Metal Box Company. He now became active in the union movement and helped to organize a strike. Dismissal from Metal Box only made him more militant so that by 1947 he had joined the Young Communist League. When the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won the 1948 South African election on the platform of Apartheid, La Guma decided to become a full member of the Communist Party. When the party was banned in 1950, he was listed under the Suppression of Communism Act. In 1954, he married Blanche Herman, a midwife, and now became active with the South African Coloured Peoples Organization. La Guma and 155 other anti-racist leaders were put on trial in 1956 for treason against the state. It was not until ~~1957~~<sup>1956</sup> that La Guma published his first short story.

La Guma was already <sup>more than 30</sup> ~~32~~ years old when "Etude" (later called "Nocturne")<sup>g</sup>  
~~was~~ published in <sup>g</sup> Cape Town newspapers. <sup>In 1955</sup> ~~Two years prior to the publication~~  
~~of the story,~~ he had started a job with "New Age" as a journalist reporting  
especially on the goings-on inside his community. It is not ~~fortuitous,~~ <sup>by chance,</sup>  
therefore, that most of the stories and novels which he produced in his life-  
time should deal with the people and situations in his oppressed community.  
All but two of his ~~the~~ <sup>g</sup> stories were produced between 195~~6~~ and 1966 while he  
was still living in South Africa. Often stories were written while <sup>he</sup> ~~La Guma~~  
was busy on a novel, so that story material is at times expanded upon in the  
novel. The vast majority of his stories deal <sup>g</sup> with the conflict of the races  
inside South Africa. Much of the story material is derived from incidents  
told to the writer and from actual events that occurred in the country.

"Nocturne" refers to Chopin's music, but it is also a reminder of La  
Guma's own love of classical music and his frequent visits to the Cape Town  
City Hall to hear the orchestra play. In the story the protagonist, Harry,  
is part of a trio ~~who is~~ <sup>g</sup> planning to rob a factory. While he and his com-  
patriots are discussing their plans for the robbery, Harry's attention is  
caught by music emanating from a piano across the street. When the discussion

is over, Harry follows the sound of the music and finds himself in a dilapidated building where an attractive girl is playing <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ nocturne. Although he is transported into a world of loveliness, he remembers his date with the other robbers and has to leave. He is, however, invited back by the girl and he departs with his head full of the notion that "it would be real smart to have a goose [girl] that played the piano like that."

In "Nocturne" <sup>g</sup> La Guma portrays the beautiful world of music in an exquisite and enchanting manner. This beauty is now contrasted with the ugly reality of the racist world that Harry survives in, the hopeless poverty of the people who inhabit the building from which the music originates, and the awful-looking building itself. And yet among these ruins La Guma shows that Harry is capable of absorbing good music and <sup>living</sup> a life free of crime. Although La Guma places <sup>g</sup> heavy blame on the unjust <sup>socio</sup> ~~social~~ political environment, he also insists that his characters should do everything possible to transcend this environment in a manner more positive than indulging in crime.

For now Harry would rather dream of a life without sin than do anything positive about it. This escapist view is also found in <sup>another of</sup> La Guma's <sup>early</sup> ~~second pub-~~ <sup>stories,</sup> ~~lished story,~~ "Out of Darkness." According to the author, this is a true

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story of a man he met in prison. The story deals with the theme of "play whiteism" and the tragic ~~result that emanates from~~ <sup>consequences of</sup> this practice. The narrator, Old Cockroach, is in a prison cell with the author, telling him how he landed in jail for killing his best<sup>st</sup> friend Joey. According to Old Cockroach, he had been "a teacher at a junior school and was doing a varsity course in his spare time" when he met and fell in love with the "beautiful" Cora. Now all his life plans, including marriage, were centered on Cora. But Cora "was almost white" and realized that in an absurd racist country such as South Africa one can benefit from one's light skin. Hence, she frequented "white places, bioscopes, cafes." Old Cockroach is "black" and was therefore unable to take Cora to these places. Cora "drifted away" from him, but he "kept loving her." Cora finally tells him "to go to hell" and calls him "a black nigger." Instead of revenging himself on Cora, Old Cockroach surprisingly kills his friend Joey who called him "a damn fool for going off over a damn play-white bitch."

In this second story La Guma shows remarkable ability to pace his narrative and to introduce the surprise twist at the right moment. His penchant for creation of dialogue and vivid description shows through well. But his

themes remain <sup>relevant</sup> ~~relative~~ to the concerns of his community, as he demonstrates  
in further stories <sup>about</sup> ~~involving~~ the coloured community <sup>and its dealings</sup> with whites and blacks.

To have anything to do with the white community, coloureds have to live out their lives literally in darkness. As a "play white", Cora must leave her coloured suburb for work before dawn and arrive home after nightfall. And her social life with whites must occur far away from the prying eyes of other coloureds. This anxiety-ridden, clandestine life of stealth is referred to again in the stories "A Glass of Wine" and "Slipper Satin." In "A Glass of Wine" a young, white boy is in love with the shebeen (illicit liquor outlet) queen, Ma Schrikker's brown daughter, Charlette. The courtship must take place in secret, but on the occasion of the story the narrator and his drunken friend Arthur are witnesses to the courtship. Arthur's drunken state allows him to question the young couple about their courtship and marriage plans.

Since his <sup>questions are</sup> ~~legitimate reasoning~~ <sup>and embarrassing</sup> is illogical in South Africa's world of racism, he is finally banished from the shebeen. It is the telling ending of the story which reveals both the writer's creative power and South Africa's cruel absurdity. When Arthur wonders aloud why he was ejected from the shebeen, the narrator answers: "You and your wedding . . . . You know that white boy

can't marry the girl, even though he may love her. It isn't allowed." Arthur responds to this revelation by uttering, "Jesus. What the hell." The use of both "Jesus" and "hell" in one breath sums up in a contradictory but devastating way one aspect of racism in South Africa.

In "Slipper Satin" it is not only <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ government-enforced law ~~of~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~immorality~~, which forbids <sup>ing</sup> love encounters between whites and blacks, that condemns the protagonist Myra, but it is also the coloured community itself which acts as a vigilante force against such meetings. Myra, a coloured girl, is in love with Tommy, a white boy. One evening at Tommy's house their privacy is invaded by the police. Aware that he had violated the "Immorality Act" and fearful of exposure to the white populace, Tommy shoots himself before he can be taken to the police station. For her part in the affair, Myra spends four months in jail. In the main, "Slipper Satin" deals with Myra's return from jail and <sup>with the</sup> ~~her~~ mother and community <sup>of</sup> violent reaction to her ~~so-~~ so-called crime. Myra had left prison with a determination to pick up her life and to begin again. After badgering from her mother and community, she decides to become a prostitute.

Interracial arrogance is also the theme of "The Gladiators." Though the

story <sup>appears to be</sup> ~~is seemingly~~ about a boxing match between a black and a coloured

South African, the "play white" phenomenon crops up again. Furthermore, La

Guma shows truthfully that ~~there is~~ <sup>exists in</sup> racism as well between the various shades

~~of~~ <sup>too</sup> the black community. ~~Because even here those~~ blacks with lighter pig-

mentation receive a greater largesse from the apartheid system, ~~and, hence,~~

they consider themselves superior to those with darker skins.

The coloured boxer, Kenny, who "just missed being white", has only con-  
tempt for his black opponent. He considers the black boxer to be a "bastard",

a "tsotsi" (street thug), and not one of "our kind." While Kenny is in con-

trol of the fight, the coloured boxing crowd shares <sup>g</sup> his racist views. But

in keeping with crowd behaviour, <sup>J</sup> they shift their loyalty to the black boxer

as soon as he takes command of the fight. La Guma ~~does not only~~ deals deftly

with the racist overtones, <sup>and also makes skillful</sup> ~~but in his~~ use of boxing language and description  
<sup>in this story.</sup>

~~of the fight, he shows a master craftsman at work.~~

The apartheid system influences the behaviour <sup>g</sup> of all South Africans,  
regardless of color or nationality. And often the cruel aspects of racism

are reinforced by class behaviour <sup>g</sup>. This is especially true in the story "At

the Portagee's", <sup>in which</sup> ~~where~~ an immigrant from Portugal owns a café in the coloured

District Six. Because ~~the~~ Portuguese immigrants are often dark <sup>in</sup> pigmentation and catholic in religion, they are barely tolerated among the Afrikaners.

They tend, therefore, to live in lower middle-class white suburbs which border

coloured districts and <sup>to own</sup> ~~carry on their livelihood as owners of~~ cheap shops in ~~the~~

coloured areas selling mostly "steak and chips", "egg rolls", "coffee", "fish",

and "Coca Cola." Although in the story the café owner's appearance is in

keeping with the <sup>sweaty shabbiness</sup> ~~shabby sweatiness~~ of his establishment, and he is dependent

on the nonwhite consumers, he displays utter contempt toward his needed clients.

As an immigrant, he regards it as his duty to be loyal to the racist policies

of the country. However, since he is not fully accepted into the white com-

munity, he shows his frustration (and supposed superiority) by being rude

to all his coloured customers, especially those who give him reason to react.

The "Lemon Orchard" and "Coffee for the Road" deal with events that

actually occurred in South Africa: ~~the threat of~~ racial violence ~~that occurs~~

when members of the oppressed groups finally refused to accept the injustices

of the apartheid system. "The Lemon Orchard" is based on the savage beating

of a coloured teacher in the rural town of Calvinia in the Cape. The teacher

had charged the minister of the Calvinia Dutch Reformed Church with assault,

"and as this was regarded by the Afrikaner community as an unheard of affront to God's servant by a Hotnot," the teacher was taken at night from his home and "beaten up savagely."

La Guma's story keeps the main outline of the actual event; but instead of simply concentrating on the blood-thirsty act that is to occur, he emphasizes more subtly the atmosphere of sterile, brutal racism tinged with the fertile, fragrant growth of a lemon orchard. Here, as earlier in "Nocturne", he displays <sup>an impressive</sup> ~~an excellent~~ ability to contrast human ugliness with nature's beauty and creates an authentic climate in which a terrible deed is to be enacted.

"The Lemon Orchard" gives the reader an excellent demonstration of how La Guma portrays the brutality of South Africa. In ironical, understated language, tone, and action, ominous hints are given of the fate that the teacher is about to suffer at the hands of five white men. The title itself is clouded in irony. The lemon fruit is a bittersweet citrus variety, and the smell it gives off is sharp and pungent. The beating that the teacher is to receive is to occur in the lemon orchard, where the "fragrant growth" and "the pleasant scent of the lemons" contrast sharply with the bitterness of

the human deed. Pleasant as the orchard may be, it is also "a small amphitheatre" where the human hyenas are to devour the victimized slave to ensure that apartheid's authority is not challenged.

"Coffee for the Road" demonstrates well how the writer uses his personal experiences and those of other people in his work. According to La Guma, "this true story was narrated to me by an East Indian South African woman. I, of course, created the atmosphere, dialogue and so on." As in most of La Guma's stories, the climactic moment is short and intense as the tired, ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> harried chief protagonist of the story in frustration hurls a thermos flask at a white serving woman. But to arrive at this point, the writer provides the reader with many intimate and informative details of geography, racial division, and human frustration.

The chief protagonist, a "dark, handsome, Indian [woman] <sup>is</sup>", is driving the family automobile from Johannesburg to Cape Town, roughly 1000 miles. The three-day journey is in its second day when the chief incident occurs. Accompanying the woman is her whining and restless six-year-old daughter, Zaida, and her slightly older son, Ray. She had driven throughout the night because in racist South Africa there were no hotels <sup>open to them,</sup> ~~to stop over at~~. At the

insistence of Zaida she decides finally to pull up outside a café on main street of a rural Karoo town to seek coffee. As in the case of hotels, the Afrikaner-dominated rural areas have no cafés where nonwhites can sit down to enjoy food and refreshment. All that is available is "a foot-square hole" in "the wall facing the vacant space" of the café where, at the point of the woman's arrival, has assembled in a line "a group of ragged Coloured and African people [who] stood in the dust and tried to peer into it, their heads together, waiting with forced patience."

The woman refuses to join the humiliating line and proceeds to walk confidently into the café, where the only customer present is "a small white boy with tow-coloured hair, a face like a near-ripe apple and a running nose." The serving woman, who is described as having "a round-shouldered, thick body and reddish-complexioned face that looked as if it had been sandblasted into its components parts", is surprised and stunned by the presence of a nonwhite person inside the "whites-only" café and screams in disgust at the woman when she asks that her "flask" be filled with coffee. Although startled by this "screeching", insulting outburst by the white serving woman, the Indian woman's years of suffering humiliation at the hands of whites suddenly reaches

the breaking point and, while accusing the white woman of being "bloody white trash", she hurls her thermos flask in "disgust" at the white woman, striking her forehead and causing her to bleed. As she storms angrily out of the café, her actions and brisk movement are "stared" at in disbelief by the ragged collection of nonwhites on the outside. She leaves the depressing town, vaguely aware that repercussions will ~~occur~~<sup>follow</sup>. White policemen, complete in "riot-truck" and "holstered pistols", are given orders to set up a roadblock on the highway and to arrest the woman.

In "A Matter of Taste" La Guma shows that regardless of the racist laws of South Africa, which seek to destroy harmonious communication between the races, there is a natural propensity among human beings to share their joy and despair. This gives reason for both hope and pessimism: hope reveals itself in the fact that the races can cooperate and aid each other; but this hope threatens the racist governors of the system and causes them to create more laws that can prevent cooperation. The story deals with two black men who have "just finished a job for the railways" and a scruffy, hungry white man who harbors dreams of working on a boat that will "make the United States." The black men are poor and are unable to afford supper--all that

they possess is some coffee, which they are in the process of boiling "some distance from the ruins of a ~~one~~-time siding." When they are ready to serve the coffee, they are surprised by the arrival of a "thin", "short", "pale white face" man who is "covered with a fine golden stubble." The man's shabby appearance indicates that he is among the discarded of the white society and that he has not had food for some time. His physical condition is clearly worse than that of the black men. But since he also is a victim of hunger he becomes one with them. <sup>However,</sup> ~~But~~ before a bond can be established among the three men, there are certain practices of the racist system that must be overcome. Chinaboy, who first observes the arrival of the white man from "the plantation", is suddenly and uneasily interrupted in his task "of pouring the coffee." Chinaboy's unease stems from the fact that although he and his friend are "camped out" near an abandoned "one-time" railway siding, whites are generally suspicious of such occurrences and respond by arming themselves and then forcibly ejecting the blacks from the land. Second, his unease reflects his indoctrinated belief that whites are far too privileged to appear in the shabby dress of the white man. The white man is also uneasy: he is not accustomed to seeking aid from blacks, but his hunger forces him

"hesitantly" and hopefully to remark, "I smell the coffee. Hope you don't  
min."

In a lesser writer the opportunity to exploit this delicate moment in a propagandistic way would be ideal. La Guma, however, deftly weaves his tale so that he may hint at the unusualness of the encounter but still continue with his chief purpose: to show that at certain levels the racist system is also a class system affecting both white and black. Hence the focus of the story becomes the common desire of the three men to have a proper meal rather than the meager offering of a cup of coffee. The difference in race becomes secondary to their culinary needs, and even when they refer to each other in usually contemptuous racist <sup>terms</sup> ~~denotations~~ such as "Whitey" and "boys," they do it more in a friendly than in a pernicious manner. In a bantering tone Chinaboy invites the new "table boarder" and the narrator jokingly refers to the "sparing" of "some of the turkey and green peas." Chinaboy, after indicating to the "white boy" that they are not "exactly" at the mayor's garden party, begins to long for "a piece of bake bread with [the] coffee." This longing by Chinaboy gives rise to a discussion of foods that are not now available to the poverty-stricken threesome and, once again, suggests the

unreality of their world.

The stories "Late Edition", "A Matter of Taste", "Tattoo Marks and Nails", and "Blankets" are anecdotes of individual interest rather than being in the tradition ~~of~~<sup>of</sup> seriously examining race relations in South Africa. These vignettes of life in District Six and in Roeland Street jail are considered by La Guma to be <sup>an</sup> "exercise of the imagination and the testing of my ability to observe and to report interesting anecdotes" In "Late Edition" the writer concentrates on a familiar scene in District Six, namely that of a young boy earning "spending money by selling newspapers." It is not so much the boy who interests the writer, but the passersby and the atmosphere of the district. In "A Matter of Honour", a slight story about a bragging former boxer and a jilted husband, it is the narrator's sensitivity and kindheartedness and the surprise ending that preoccupy the writer. "Tattoo Marks and Nails" also ends in a surprising way when the narrator, Ahmed the Turk, prepares to disrobe himself and in so doing demonstrates that he is not the cheating, imprisoned second world war soldier who had been humiliated by his fellow prisoners with a shameful tattoo.

In the story "Blankets" La Guma deals to some extent with the life of the

unfortunate drunk and bully Choker. By highlighting moments when Choker used certain types of blankets, the reader is given insight into his life. And in "Thang's Bicycle", which was written in 1975 when La Guma first visited Vietnam and when the war with the South Vietnamese and the United States was close to its end, La Guma shows that it is not difficult for him to write stories of interest and concern about situations that are different from those in South Africa. His characteristic qualities of creating atmosphere, portraying character, designing realistic dialogue, and fashioning an interesting and imaginative tale are all very much present here. The reader finishes the story more aware of the devastation in Vietnam and appreciating the roles that both humans and machines played in the struggle against the forces of South Vietnam and the United States.

La Guma's first novel, A Walk in the Night, was published in 1962. He completed the novel in 1960 but was arrested under the State of Emergency which the government declared immediately after the massacre of 69 blacks at Sharpeville and the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Prime Minister Verwoerd. From his cell in jail he instructed his wife to mail the manuscript to Mbari Publications in Nigeria. The manuscript, however, was kept deliberately at

a South African post office for over one year and his wife was fortunate to retrieve it. It was eventually handed to Ulli Beier of Mbari when he made a personal visit to South Africa in 1961.

As a reporter and columnist for "New Age" and as an active opponent of the apartheid regime, La Guma had written extensively about the plight of the coloured people. A Walk in the Night both embodies and extends the work he was doing as a journalist and political activist. In it he demonstrates that the coloured community is "struggling to see the light, to see the dawn, to see something new." The novel, then, concerns itself with the social, economic, and political purpose of the coloured community. The developing consciousness of the community is depicted through the development of many major and minor characters and through the setting of District Six. First there is Michael Adonis's gradual movement from being a law-abiding citizen to the desperate position of being a "skollie" or local thug. Second, the novel studies the development of the lives of Willieboy and the "skollies" and shows how inevitably Adonis will either become like Willieboy or the "skollies." Third, through the study of the perverse police work of Constable Raalt, the reader is given an insight into the objectives and modus operandi

of the South African white police. Last, La Guma describes the conditions of living of District Six and demonstrates clearly why the lives of the various characters develop as they do.

The development of consciousness in Michael Adonis is closely tied to the racial problems in South Africa and the social environment that exists in District Six. When the reader first meets Adonis, he has just lost his job because he refused to cower to the cheap insults of a white worker. In his anger he confronts Willieboy who escapes Adonis's work experience because he refuses to work at all. He prefers to live parasitically off his friends and strangers. In a way Adonis envies Willieboy's nonchalant attitude, but he is still too defiant and vengeful to accept slothfulness. At this stage he makes contact with the "skollies" as well, but since they live violently off others, he shies away from joining their group.

Upon returning to his shabby room in a dilapidated building he confronts the discarded, poor-white Uncle Doughty. At the invitation of Uncle Doughty he enters the old man's room and shares some cheap wine with him. When Uncle Doughty begins to identify Adonis's troubles with his own, and when he describes the two of them who walk the night as ghosts like "Hamlet's father's

ghost", Adonis recognizes the race difference between them and sees in the old man all the racist sins of the white society. In his anger he strikes Uncle Doughty dead. Fearful of <sup>the consequences</sup> his crime he joins the underworld gang of "skollies" and literally begins to walk the night.

Willieboy's life is pathetic throughout. He is the product of a home where his father was a drunk and a wife-beater. In turn, his mother beat him mercilessly. As a child he found escape from his cruel life by going to the movies and imagining himself to be "a big shot." Willieboy refuses to work as an adult and lives off the generosity of others. Soon after Adonis kills Uncle Doughty Willieboy enters the dead man's room. He quickly makes retreat but is spotted by one of the tenants in the building who accuses him of murder. Like Adonis, Willieboy, knowing that his innocence will not be accepted by an unjust society, now begins to walk the night. He is, however, apprehended <sup>shot</sup> by Constable Raalt, and his life ends with bullet wounds in the back of a police van.

Adonis chose to join the "skollies" instead of Willieboy precisely because the life of sloth which Willieboy lived was sooner or later to end in a pathetic manner. It is through policemen such as Constable Raalt that the system of

injustice is perpetuated. Since La Guma spent a considerable part of his life in jail or house detention, he knew the work of the police well. Some of his most remarkable characters are policemen. In depicting Raalt he provides the police with a human face.

Raalt is completely contemptuous of the coloured community. He encourages gambling and prostitution among the coloured people because he is able to obtain "protection money." Raalt's investigation of the murder of Uncle Doughty shows the contempt that he has for coloureds and the hatred which the people have for him. When Willieboy is accused, he begins a determined and relentless pursuit which does not end until he shoots his prey. To behave without conscience is hard to accept. La Guma, therefore, observes Raalt's marital problems and sees this as a possible <sup>explanation for his brutality.</sup> ~~escape hatch~~

A Walk in the Night was well-received right from its inception, and La Guma was considered to be a writer of great promise and talent. The novel has been translated into 20 languages and continues to be read <sup>widely.</sup> ~~on a regular~~

~~basis.~~ For ~~new~~ people who are interested in knowing something about South Africa, La Guma strives to <sup>provide information and graphic evidence of</sup> ~~develop a compassionate and informed reader, and~~ <sup>injustice and oppression; he handles</sup> in the elements of plot, character, and ~~use of imagery he succeeds,~~ very well.

La Guma's second novel, And a Threefold Cord, was published in 1964 in Berlin. The novel was written while the author was a prisoner in the Cape Town jail on Roeland Street. On this particular occasion he and many others were jailed because the government feared a mass insurrection after Nelson Mandela and several major figures of the Congress Movement were arrested. La Guma spent five months in prison, several in solitary confinement. The negotiations for the publication of the book were carried out in prison between the writer and his attorney, and he literally "signed the contract" there.

The chief character of And a Threefold Cord, as was the case in A Walk in the Night, is the socio-economic and political environment of the Cape Town slum where the human action occurs. The dreadful lives of the victims of this environment are examined at a time when the Cape winter has set in and where the rain has fallen continuously for days. The reader is made aware of the woeful slum situation at the very beginning of the novel when La Guma describes the misery and shabby conditions of those who inhabit the crowded "pondokkie cabins" and who must now face the cold rain. The world of the South African slum is one of bare survival, <sup>a world of</sup> ~~where in addition to~~ corrugated cardboard cartons, rusted sheets of iron and tin, bitumen and old sacking.

~~and also employed to "stuff . . . into the cracks and joints."~~ In his slow, meticulous manner, La Guma surveys the dismal conditions of the slum. He focuses in particular on the shack of the Pauls family which had been built in a hurry so as to prepare shelter for Ma Pauls, who was at the time pregnant with her third child, Caroline. The shack of the Pauls family is typical of the other structures in the slum. It is a veritable land of squalor, decay and poverty.

It is what poverty does to the inhabitants of the slum district that preoccupies La Guma in the novel. The shacks in their varying stages of collapse house inhabitants who because of their crowded, poverty-stricken, and frustrating lives take to cheap liquor, prostitution, family quarrels, and violence. Their already miserable lives are dogged further by sickness, police raids, and the exploitation by the strong among them of the weak ones in the tenement. The inhabitants of the slum are trapped in the same manner as the fly whose actions are described in painful detail by La Guma. They have been unconcernedly knocked down by the racist and class system of South Africa, and in their struggling, collapsing positions they are frantically attempting to save themselves from complete destruction. But the more they

flail and thrash<sup>a</sup> to survive, the more hopeless it seems. And instead of forming a community to console each other, shack dwellers turn <sup>inward</sup> ~~on themselves~~ to seek solace and satisfaction and to rebuild their destroyed egos. Some of the shack dwellers see their poverty-stricken state as God-made and believe that, by trusting in God, things in time will be set right. Most of these drink themselves into a stupor so as to forget their miserable condition. Others, as in the case of Roman, indulge in cheap wine not only to forget the pain of their condition, but to fire themselves up with so-called courage to take out their frustration through violent acts on others. Poverty drives attractive young women such as Susie Meyer to prostitution.

But poverty does not only lead to excessive drinking, overt violence and prostitution, it also causes severe illness and infectious diseases among the inhabitants. <sup>Already,</sup> ~~And when these diseases and illnesses have entered the already~~

~~undernourished, bodies of the inhabitants,~~ they are unable to obtain medical help because they are too poor to pay for the services of physicians. The case of Dad Pauls is illustrated in the novel. The almost unbearable misery of the slum dweller is further compounded by <sup>regular</sup> ~~constant~~ police raids. Instead of building a proper settlement for the impoverished, the South African

authorities employ large numbers of police who under the name of "law and order" brutalize the already wretched slum dwellers.

Although And a Threefold Cord is a powerful work which exposes the cruelty of the apartheid-dominated state, it <sup>was</sup> not ~~been~~ <sup>until 1988,</sup> reprinted and, hence, it is the least known of La Guma's work.

The Stone Country was first published in Berlin in 1967, a year after La Guma had gone into exile from South Africa. The novel, however, was written inside South Africa immediately after La Guma spent five months in jail for being a member of an "illegal political organization." At this time the writer was already under a twenty-four hour, five-year house arrest order.

The Stone Country is based <sup>essentially</sup> upon the writer's own experiences and the experiences of other prisoners in South African prisons. As in the previous novels, the chief character of the novel is the socio-economic and political environment of South Africa, which creates the conditions of brutality that the major and minor characters of the novel have to contend with. The prison is a "stone country" where guards and prisoners are "enforced inhabitants of another country, another world." The prison is the last line of defense <sup>c</sup> of the racist system.

The portrait of discrimination against colour, inhumanity against other men, cruel authority and general brutality in the stone prison is an extension of the stone country that is South Africa. As seen in the earlier work, here, too, against brutal odds similar to those found in the prison, the black population cowers before the rigorous imposition of the Apartheid system. Again, La Guma is searching for a character who can demonstrate to the other oppressed that it is possible to oppose monsters such as Fatso. Hence, he invests models George Adams ~~both after himself and after~~ <sup>with</sup> the ideas of human dignity <sup>that</sup> he holds. From the moment that Adams enters the jail he argues for his rights as an awaiting-trial prisoner and he urges every prisoner that he comes into contact with to do the same. But Adams's defiant spirit is curbed somewhat by the reality <sup>in</sup> ~~the~~ prison. Here he discovers, as he did in the non-prison world of South Africa, that rights may exist but they are ignored. The prison, like South Africa, is conceived by both the oppressed and the oppressor as a world of survival of the fittest. Hence Adams's attempt to win over the other prisoners to his side is unsuccessful. The prison is ruled by types such as Fatso and Butcherboy and only death, as in the case of Butcherboy, can assure a new regime of brutality to dominate.

Once more La Guma is faced with the <sup>sad</sup> ~~despairing~~ reality of South Africa:  
this is a country where most inhabitants have willingly or unwillingly accepted  
that merely to <sup>exist</sup> ~~survive~~ one must either become a bully or find alternative  
<sup>of survival</sup> means that are not any more <sup>honorable</sup> ~~complimentary~~ than the first choice. The long  
extended metaphor that La Guma employs in The Stone Country in which a  
mouse has been brutally clubbed and clawed by the prison cat also applies to  
the inmates of the prison. The sullen young Casbah Kid has taken his frustra-  
tion out by killing another oppressed innocent person and in prison he  
delivers the death blow to Butcherboy. He accepts his fate - life is a  
jungle where the fittest alone survives. Butcherboy is the headman of the  
jungle killing squad. He terrorizes everyone in prison and his immense  
energy is employed in a negative manner. Alone in defying the prison  
officials, Adams almost in a resigned manner accepts the escape attempt of  
Gus, Morgan and Koppe, <sup>seeing</sup> ~~and sees~~ it as at least a sign of defiance in some  
prisoners. But for the majority of the inmates life in prison is a defeatist  
extension of what life is like outside prison. La Guma sheds his reporter's  
garb of the earlier books, and as the political prisoner George Adams he tries  
to ~~discover and~~ <sup>to</sup> influence the minds of those characters who lived in the

earlier novels. Here, too, he discovers that the prisoners are generally the same people who created so much pain and havoc in their slum settlements and who now continue to behave in a selfish and monstrous manner. Again, as in the earlier books, the apartheid system stands unchallenged and the oppressed ghosts continue to walk the night.

The Stone Country was, from the beginning, well received by the reading public. Parts of the novel have been anthologized. It has also been translated into several languages. Although the book gives an authentic account of happenings in South African jails, it is, ~~however~~, not La Guma's most memorable work.

In the Fog of the Season's End was published in 1972 in London. Although it appeared six years after La Guma had left South Africa, it had been conceived and substantially written while he was still there. The novel is his most explicitly autobiographical work. Not only is it dedicated to one of his closest friends, Basil February, who died on the battlefield as a guerrilla activist, but, as La Guma observes, "everyone mentioned in the novel and every incident come from my lived past." The depiction of the chief character Beukes and his arduous work is largely a portrait of La Guma and his political

activities. The places that appear in the novel are coloured suburbs of Cape Town with the exception of the black township, Langa, where Tekwane is arrested and Beukes wounded and the "expensive" white Cape Town suburb where Beukes wanders around and witnesses a carefree social gathering.

The characters are real figures who worked with the writer in the resistance struggle. Elias Tekwane's name is fictitious, and so are the names of Flotman, Polsky, Abdullah, Isaac, Tommy, Henny April, Halima, and Beatie Adams. But the roles they play in the novel are the actual ones they performed and are still performing. <sup>However,</sup> ~~But~~ La Guma refuses to reveal their names ~~because~~ <sup>for</sup> of security reasons, since many are still living and carrying on the struggle in South Africa. La Guma refers to several incidents that occurred in his own life: his first, personal experience with race discrimination at the circus; the school concert where they prepare themselves to sing at a white school; his experience as a factory worker; his stint at the American oil company where Isaac works; and the meeting and courting of Frances, although he did not marry this girl in his own life. But the father of Frances in the novel and his interest in rugby are part of his history with Blanche Herman, the woman whom La Guma married in 1954. Beukes's frequent

-52-

absences from his home to carry on his political work and to escape the dragnet of the security police are directly from La Guma's life experience. Although La Guma was never wounded, the doctor who treats Beukes "is still very much alive in Cape Town." And as La Guma indicates, the despair and joy and the fear and hope that Beukes expresses "are straight out of my own life history."

The emphasis of In the Fog of the Season<sup>USA</sup> End is on the ~~positive, and~~ ~~revolutionary development of the South African resistance and liberation movement.~~ But to appreciate the new, ~~and~~ defiant response of some of the oppressed, La Guma once more has to return to the theme of his earlier work to show how the protest arose. Hence the novel <sup>develops</sup> ~~returns to~~ the familiar theme of the devastating ~~and tragic~~ effects that the socio-economic and political situation has on the oppressed people. Once again the reader is taken on a slow, ~~and~~ painful tour through the human destruction that the apartheid regime and its system have contrived. In the first chapter of the novel, La Guma shows us the now familiar side of apartheid. The municipal park that Beukes is resting <sup>has</sup> in segregated ~~the~~ benches <sup>for</sup> ~~between~~ "Whites" and "Non-Whites." Behind the "maze of pathways" leading to the museum is an "open-air restaurant" reserved for "Whites Only." A sign near the top of the statue of Rhodes points toward

"the segregated lavatories." The museum that Beukes finally enters once had separate "Whites" and "Non-Whites" entrances but now begrudgingly permits non-white visitors on <sup>certain</sup> ~~special~~ ~~days~~ days.

The beaches of South Africa are divided along racial lines, with the inferior <sup>places</sup> ~~pieces~~ being set aside for the nonwhites. Discrimination exists at the railway station as well. Apart from the separate <sup>g</sup> ~~racial~~ entrances to the station and the <sup>different</sup> compartments and seats for ~~the~~ <sup>n</sup> races, nonwhites are also forbidden to cross the "White footbridge." When Beukes circumvents the security-police network, he considers the use of the footbridge, but he is deterred by the forceful reminder that "a Coloured man had recently been sentenced to twenty pounds or ten days" for using the "White bridge." The magistrate had further warned the fined person that "sterner measures would be taken if the practice continued . . . ." And, as Beukes discovers at the age of seven, the schools as well are divided rigidly along colour <sup>J</sup> lines: "They had been told that they would be giving a special performance of their concert for a White school. That was really the first time that the little boy had realized that children called 'White' attended separate schools."

Perhaps the most serious indignity and injustice the apartheid system

perpetrates is to force all blacks over the age of sixteen years to carry the hated pass book. In In the Fog of the Season<sup>USA</sup> End, La Guma gives this aspect of the racist system much attention. In <sup>depicting</sup> what occurs <sup>of</sup> a countless ~~number of~~ times every day in South Africa La Guma makes the reader vividly aware of the total power that the regime wields over the oppressed. ~~La Guma~~<sup>He</sup> goes on to depict a discussion between a <sup>an aggressive</sup> ~~brutal, contemptuous~~ white South African policeman and a black man, who, although his credentials are impeccable, is subjected to <sup>abusive treatment.</sup> ~~the terrifying situation of apartheid~~ South Africa. The black man is humiliated by the officer's use of the derogatory denotation of "kaffir", by his insolent and absurd questioning, by his contempt and brutality, and by the laws of the country that subject a citizen to so much indignity. Without the pass the black man is not permitted to live in his township, to travel from one place to another, to work, <sup>or</sup> ~~and~~, in fact, to exist, as indicated by the policeman. But even with the pass the black man is not permitted to have his family visit or live with him without prior permission or he stands to have "the wrath of the Devil and all his minions" invoked against him. The policeman also reminds the man that he is "not allowed to leave" his job with his present employer without permission, nor can he leave his present place

of abode for another without consent. It is the humiliation that Elias Tekwane suffers at the pass office that spurs him on to revolt against the racist system.

In the face of an environment that is dominated by a brutal police force with their cohorts of "informers" and <sup>by</sup> many members of an oppressed community who are selfish, class-oriented, wrapped in unreality, and who turn their frustration on each other, it seems difficult and at times impossible to organize a resistance and liberation movement against the racist regime. In moments of despair and longing to be with Frances and his child, Beukes wonders as well, "Why the hell am I doing this?" Fortunately, he abandons "the thought a little reluctantly, discarding it like a favourite coat, and went along the road, carrying the cheap case packed with illegal handbills." Beukes knows that he is a tiny but necessary part of a struggle that began with the Bushmen warriors at the beginning of the Dutch invasion of South Africa in 1652. He knows that he is part of a just struggle that has had its moments of <sup>victory</sup> ~~triumph~~ in the early wars between the blacks and whites and that must once again and finally <sup>triumph,</sup> ~~reach the upper hand.~~ Hence, although the task of defeating an "ignoble regime" is very heavy, and even though the help

needed is "as shaky as hell", it is necessary to hang on because "sometimes . . . you understand why, often because there was nothing else to do. You couldn't say, the hell with it, I'm going home."

The successful departure to "the north" of "Peter", "Michael", and "Paul" is a short moment of triumph for the resistance work carried out by Tekwane, Beukes, and others. But it is an essential moment that people such as Beukes, Tekwane, Flotman, and Abdullah must have to carry on their uplifting but difficult task. Hence, when one of Beukes's protégées, Isaac, turns up at Henny April's place as the guerrilla activist Paul, Beukes can hardly restrain his joy. Isaac takes the place of Basil February, to whom the novel is dedicated, and also symbolizes to Beukes the warrior past of the oppressed, the future victory of the just struggle for liberation, and the chief reason for his task of preparing and awakening the people for the battle at hand. Hence, unlike the first three books, In the Fog of the Season End concludes with the certain knowledge that the foggy night with its walking ghosts is about to be burned away. The final, triumphant vision of a liberated South Africa is one that Beukes can "turn back to where the children had gathered in the sunlit yard."

In the Fog of the Season <sup>VS</sup> End has proved to be La Guma's best received work to date. ~~It has been~~ Described as a major achievement in African literature, <sup>it</sup> ~~it~~ has been translated into twenty languages and <sup>it</sup> ~~it~~ outsells ~~any of~~ his ~~the~~ other books.

La Guma's last novel, Time of the Butcherbird, was published in 1979 in London. It is the first of the books that was conceived and written in its entirety outside South Africa. Free of constant harassment and surveillance by the South African security police and now able to place all his energies behind the struggle of the Liberation ~~Movement~~ in exile, the writer is able in this novel to address a central question of South African society in a more revolutionary way.

In his characteristic manner, La Guma has in <sup>a</sup> ~~a~~ ~~succinct~~ and succinct manner succeeded to pack together in Time of the Butcherbird two major stories and a number of shorter ones. The major stories are tied integrally to the theme of the time of the butcherbird and deal with the personal revenge of Shilling Murile, ~~the~~ the forced mass removal of the blacks, and their resistance to this <sup>removal.</sup> ~~occurrence~~. The minor stories, and in some cases more personal portraits, <sup>g</sup> ~~stories~~ deal with the failed marriage of Edgar Stopes and Maisie

Barends, the history of Oupa Meulen, the struggle between Hlangeni and Mma-Tau, and the dismal failure to establish harmonious and just relationships between blacks and whites on both the personal and collective levels. All of these stories, major and minor, are held together by the metaphor of the butcherbird. The butcherbird is common in South Africa and is found especially in areas where there are cattle, sheep, and pigs. These livestock are generally molested by blood-sucking insects known as "ticks" in South Africa. The butcherbird preys on these parasites, and in performing this <sup>useful</sup> ~~task~~ <sup>it</sup> is considered by rural dwellers as a bird of good omen that cleanses nature of negative influences. The book, ~~is~~ therefore, <sup>reflects</sup> ~~a testimony to~~ La Guma's belief that the time of cleansing South Africa's negative ways has come.

Shilling Murile's revenge of his brother's death occupies a large part of the story. The stalking and killing of Hannes Meulen, who had been instrumental in the death of his brother Timi, <sup>exemplify</sup> ~~satisfy a part of~~ the role of the butcherbird. But the butcherbird's destruction of parasites satisfies the entire population that live off the livestock. Murile, on the other hand, seeks at first personal revenge, and even though his action brings to an end the cruel and ignoble life of Meulen, he does not see his task as benefiting all

those who have suffered at the hands of Meulen. When he finally joins forces with the collective struggle, he becomes an integral part of the butcherbird's essential work of cleansing the society of parasites.

The parasite <sup>ic</sup> "tick" or insect, <sup>Hannes,</sup> Meulen, is described ~~equally~~ well ~~by the~~ writer. La Guma traces <sup>his</sup> ~~Hannes Meulen's~~ ancestral roots and shows how his family had robbed the blacks of their ancestral land. <sup>This</sup> ~~In so doing, the writer~~ gives the reader an intimate and authentic view of the Afrikaner people. La Guma sees in Hannes Meulen a modern Afrikaner but one who continues to treat blacks with contempt.

A part of the black community, <sup>g</sup> led by chief Hlangeni's militant sister, <sup>example</sup> Mma-Tau, follows Murile ~~by~~ by refusing to leave their ancestral land and instead <sup>ing</sup> challenge those who had come to remove them. Being used to meek and resigned blacks, the sergeant refuses at first to accept Mma-Tau's authority or the decision to disobey "the orders from the government." Annoyed at the songs of resistance, the sergeant "unbuttons his pistol holster," and this causes a black youth to "hurl a stone at" him. The stone misses the sergeant, but his clerk panics and begins to flee, <sup>creating</sup> ~~This action creates~~ fear and confusion among the drivers of the convoy, <sup>who</sup> ~~and they~~ decide to drive away from the scene. ~~Red~~

~~g~~ faced and Embarrassed, the sergeant wonders "who would have thought that these bloody kaffirs would start something like this?" And, not convinced as yet by the militant action of the blacks, he views the resistance as a defeat "by a lot of baboons in jumble-sale clothing." <sup>The blacks,</sup> ~~And~~ to confirm their determination not to permit the "ticks" to continue to suck their blood without resistance, ~~thro~~ stones ~~are thrown~~ at the sergeant and his convoy.

The sergeant returns to the town to seek reinforcements, while the black people, led by Mma-Tau, move into the hills to continue their resistance to enslavement, <sup>g</sup> as Madonele indicates. The final three paragraphs contrast sharply with the opening of the book: gone is the hopelessness of the opening scene where Hlangeni and the remnant of his followers await their ~~ultimate~~ <sup>and despairing</sup> death as they succumb to the cruel laws of the white society. As the "yellowing afternoon light puts a golden colour on the land", a "flight of birds swoop overhead towards a water-hole." The symbolism is clear: the drought of human destruction and unjust dispossession of land has ended, and now the butcherbird will smell out the sorcerer, hunt him down, and cleanse the society of his bloodsucking, negative nature.

Time of the Butcherbird relies quite heavily on symbolism and historical

narrative and less on the immediate experience which was so characteristic  
 in the South African-based novels. <sup>a consequence,</sup> As ~~such~~ readers have not shown the same  
 enthusiasm <sup>for it</sup> as for the other books. However, <sup>it is still read widely</sup> ~~the novel is read in many countries~~  
 and has been translated into <sup>a number of</sup> ~~other~~ languages.

Before La Guma died he was busy on several projects. First, his sixth  
 novel, "Crowns of Battle", had been planned extensively and two rough chapters  
 had been written. This novel concerns itself with the nineteenth-century  
 battle at Rorke's Drift in Natal when the famed Zulu warriors inflicted a  
 heavy defeat on the white settler forces. The writer had also sketched in  
 some detail material for two short stories. And, finally, he had started to  
 collect data for an autobiography.

Throughout La Guma's life he succeeded <sup>in combining</sup> ~~to combine~~ his political and  
 literary activities. His task was always that of supporting the forces  
 that were to bring the liberation of men, women and children in South Africa  
 and in the world at large. To this end, he created in his books memorable  
 characters and situations. ~~Not only has~~ <sup>He</sup> been an articulate ~~and informative~~  
 spokesperson for his society, <sup>one who</sup> ~~but he~~ has left his mark as an important  
 writer both in Africa and the world.

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