

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to join me on "Arts and Africa"; in this week's programme I'll be looking at new publications in prose and poetry.

Two years ago Arts and Africa held a poetry competition and we were all delighted at the number of entries it attracted, well over 3,000 poems from more than 700 poets. We hold a lot of competitions at the BBC and they do tend to come and go, excitement and expectation, surprise and disappointment - usually all forgotten after the results have been announced. But that's not the case with the Arts and Africa Poetry Award - because two years after its original conception, the competition has resulted in a new publication, a new anthology of poems from Africa made up of the best poems from 45 participants in the competition. The collection is called "Summer Fires of Mulanje Mountain" submitted by Malawian poet and banker Edison Mpina. Here he is describing to Neville Harms how he felt when he heard he'd won.

EDISON MPINA

I was naturally excited. I didn't expect it. The third prize, the second prize would do but the first prize really was encouraging.

NEVILLE HARMS

How long have you actually been writing?

EDISON MPINA

I have written poetry since 1969.

NEVILLE HARMS

What was the first stimulus?

EDISON MPINA

I feel the first stimulus was that the prose that I wrote at that time did not have enough imagery and did not carry through the images, the imagination, the message that I wanted to carry through to my readers. That's why I turned to poetry.

NEVILLE HARMS

Your poetry is very tight, very dense. Would you accept that you're rather a difficult poet to get to grips with?

EDISON MPINA

I am only an upcoming poet and if you say I'm difficult, I'm pleased of that, because I want to carry a definite message across. In the poem that got first prize, as you remember, it talks about the tribe, my tribe, and digs through my roots. My tribe came from Mozambique, a long time ago, at the beginning of this century, and it is interesting to note that until the present day the elders of my tribe still remember the life they had in Mozambique and the "Summer Fires" might help to remind them of the life they left behind in Mozambique.

NEVILLE HARMS

There does seem to have developed in Malawi a school of poets almost. Are you part of that school of Malawi poetry?

EDISON MPINA

I am part of the school of Malawi poetry and here I would like to give thanks to the writers workshop at Chancellor College which has helped me see my way and improve my poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Edison Mpina, winner of the first prize. And for the winner of the second prize, Kofi Anyidoho, the stormy political life of his home country has been a powerful stimulus to his poetry, but he's not a purely political poet, as he explains.

KOFI ANYIDHOHO

It's not always possible to draw a line between work, the place it ends and where the public concern begins. It could work the other way around that something which is essentially a public concern may indeed be felt deeply at the personal level. I grew up in a very active tradition with my mother and my uncles who are so involved actively in composing and performing songs. Now you couldn't help noticing that the thing that most moved people when they listened to these songs, among these things, the way in which the poetic imagination can get hold of aspects of life and basically use words in such a way as to really affect the audience, to leave a certain impact on the audience. Even something you can carry away with you in your mind, in your feelings and I grew very sensitive to the intense exploration of metaphor, of imagery and symbolism which the oral tradition very much dwells on, as far as I know.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kofi Anyidoho. And for those of you who want to make a go of writing poetry, but are finding the going tough you may find the words of the winner of the third prize encouraging.

MARJORIE OLUDHE-MACGOYE

For poetry I will say that after I came to this country there was about 13 years or so when I couldn't write anything that satisfied me. Every poem I wrote went straight into the wastepaper basket. Then I got a sort of new lease of life and I started again. But one way or another I've been writing all my life.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the voice of Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye, winner of the third prize in our poetry competition - her poem "Shairi La Ukombozi" was inspired by the detention of Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo.

MARJORIE OLUDHE-MACGOYE

I rather tend to regard myself as a failed novelist and other people tend to regard me as a poet who writes bad novels. It's also an interesting thing about Kenya as compared with Britain that people do seem to notice and remember a poem perhaps more than a story.

NEVILLE HARMS

What sort of thing do you write? Because I mean your third prize winning poem was a poem about Ngugi. It was a very personal poem but in a very carefully controlled, rather formal literary style. Which was the most important thing in that poem, getting the form right or was it the personal reaction to Ngugi's detention?

MARJORIE OLUDHE-MACGOYE

I think obviously the substance of a poem is always the prime thing but the poem doesn't appear without a form. Therefore you can't really separate it. This particular poem was in fairly conscious imitation of a Swahili form, not a literal following of it but the feminine endings, the rhyme, the repetition in a different grammatical context is characteristic of certain Swahili verse forms. If you ask me why I did that I think partly because Ngugi is always telling us we mustn't write in English and I don't feel up to writing in Swahili although I know Swahili so this was the nearest I could come to that to satisfying this requirement.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye, winner of the third prize in the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award. Her poem, "Shairi La Ukombozi" along with those of forty four other poets, can be found in a new anthology called "Summer Fires" Heinemann are the publishers and the publication date is set for next week when the South African poet and critic Dennis Brutus will be assessing it.

And now to the prose part of the programme. Our guest this week is Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah. His latest book "Close Sesame" has just been published by Allison & Busby. It's the third novel in a trilogy - the first was "Sweet and Sour Milk" and the second was "Sardines". Welcome Nuruddin. Did you conceive of the three novels as making up a trilogy right from the beginning or did it just grow that way?

NURUDDIN FARAH

Yes I thought of the trilogy as a trilogy right from the moment I started, in fact the first word. The reason was because I thought that I would deal with different aspects of dictatorship in Somali in particular, but in Africa in general or even outside Africa, where I would look at how society and beaurocratic oppression creates limitations in the lives of people, makes them suspicious of one and other, makes the father suspicious of the son, the husband of the wife, the daughter of the mother.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now we come to "Close Sesame". Here you are talking about Degrie who, I think, is the chief character and his son Mursal. Now you say that in it you are trying to portray a patriarch who is not trying to behave as one, but is trying to learn from his son how the problem of dictatorship could be tackled. It would seem to me that in the boo,, the father seemed to be rather suspicious of the son, what he's been doing. H^d kept asking him WWhat have you been up to? Are you plotting against the ruler?" and I don't have the feeling.....

NURUDDIN FARAH

Well unlike some of the other patriarchs who would tell their children not to have their own thoughts, this particular patriarch who is also a nationalist and whose been through all sorts of prisons, through even the prison of the present dictatorship in Somalia, the question is whether or not as a matter of fact there is a clash between people of different ages.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

All through I think Deyne is a very interesting character, very complicated. Of course he's a very old man, tends rather to be sentimental as you would expect a man of his age to be. But at the same time he's a tough character but somehow he is rather soft.

NURUDDIN FARAH

No, I don't think he is soft. I think there are layers and layers in the trilogy, for example, different aspects of it and one of the aspects that runs through the whole trilogy is the link that I tried to make between colonial dictatorships as we have known them when the British and Italians and the French and the other European powers are in Africa, and the now colonial dictatorships which to my way of thinking as the same if not even worse. Now the new colonial dictatorships are such that they become things very difficult, they make things very difficult. For one when the man whom you have to kill and to get rid of is a man who has been with you all the time, when your brother becomes the one who betrays you, it's very difficult. You see when the Europeans, when the colonial pwers were there it was very easy. Things were clear-cut. You knew who the enemy was, you rallied support amongst the people and you said to them these were white people, let's go and get rid of them. So it makes it very difficult. There is no question of sentiment in the old man. You know what the old man is trying to say is having seen what has happened to all these other young people who are sacrificing their lives in order to have a better future for their children and for themselves, how can one bite off the last bits of meat off a bone without hurting the teeth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And there's also a very pleasant domestic to the book. It was a sort of relief from the question of politics and murder which is really the main theme of the book.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Yes, I don't know which is the main theme of the book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I think it's as you said you attack on dictatorship.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Yes it seems to me as if people actually say well now we're dealing with the harsh realities of dictatorship and of life, and the family being middle class educated intellectual family as it were, Musal is a lawyer, his wife is an American Jew and they're educated, they have very good jobs, Whereas some of the people in the non-middle class families would have to go and queue up for a pound of rice and a kilo of sugar for something like six or seven hours. The reason why I wanted to show it was the contrast between the domesticity of people who were actually involved in the day to day politics of Somalia and wanted to give relief as you say even to myself thinking about dictatorship and trying to find a link between inner peace and the outside horror and violence and aggression.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nuruddin Farah thank you very much indeed.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that's it for Arts and Africa this week. Join me again at the same time next week. For now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.