

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to 'Arts and Africa'. Today's programme takes us straight to the troubled heart of South Africa and the people who write about it.

EXCERPT from 'The Urchin' from the book of short stories 'Hungry Flames' edited by Mbulelo Mzamane.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That vivid description of township life comes from a short story by Can Themba called 'The Urchin'. It's part of a collection of short stories 'Hungry Flames' published this year and edited by the South African writer Mbulelo Mzamane. Mbulelo Mzamane himself is as much at home with the short story form, 'My Cousin comes to Jo'burg' was his first collection, as with the novel, his most recent one being 'The Children of Soweto', a fictional account of the 1976 Soweto riots. He now teaches literature and politics at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. But when he was in London recently, he came to Bush House, and talked to Florence Akst. They talked first about the thinking behind 'Hungry Flames' the collection of short stories he edited.

MBULELO MZAMANE

There are two things I had in mind in compiling the anthology. One, it seems to me that of all the literary journals the short story in particular is one that tends to be neglected and ignored and not to be seen, in fact, as a serious literary genre with great demands of its own, as it were. This meant therefore that a great deal of the literature of South Africa which has been through the short story medium tends to be somewhat ignored because not so many people look to the short story - people tend to look to the novel or poetry. So that was one of my motivations, to bring to the fore this rich tradition in terms of the genre itself.

FLORENCE AKST

And do you look on these short stories, however short they are, as real, genuine, creative literature and not just a little story scribbled for a magazine?

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes precisely. I think the South African writer has tended to express himself through the short story medium. This might have to do with the rich story-telling tradition as, for instance, exemplified in the Zulu inganikwane or the Xhosa intsomi tradition. A lot has been written about this kind of oral narrative in our traditions.

FLORENCE AKST

Do you think it also could be the fact that there was the possibility of being published? There are, and have been in the past, quite a few journals and magazines and newspapers that accepted short stories.

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes. I do think that no literary tradition can really flourish without a vigorous magazine tradition, and the fact that they have excelled so much in the short story medium has to do precisely with the fact that our avenues, available avenues for publication, tended to favour, throughout these fifty years or so represented in the short stories, the short story in particular.

FLORENCE AKST

And raises the standard so that

MBULELO MZAMANE

And the standard has been rising in fact, and this I hope the anthology also illustrates. I was having one eye on the teacher, the student and the would-be person who is interested not just purely in literary matters but also a little in the social forces behind the literary works. South African literature in particular is fairly closely tied to outside events, to political developments within the country which it tends to reflect one way or the other, sometimes very sadly, at other times so blatantly as to be sheer pamphleteering. But I do hope that what I have brought out here are people who have responded to the social forces at work creatively, imaginatively, you know, with considerable subtlety, most of the time.

FLORENCE AKST

So 'Hungry Flames' is to some extent a history of at least urban experience, urban black experience this century?

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes. This century's history in South Africa has been largely a history of growing urbanisation, growing industrialisation.

FLORENCE AKST

Perhaps it's because the stories are so urban, and I'm just thinking of 'The Urchin' for instance, and your own 'The Day of the Riots', so many of them are very violent stories.

MBULELO MZAMANE

I think South African life is very violent, and I am not just talking at the literal level of violence, but institutionalised violence permeates to all aspects of life and there is a tendency for all of this to be brutalising, even to the individuals so affected, and some of it actually tends to turn inwards. This is the great tragedy as I see it of life in South Africa. It tends to be an inward, self-destructing type of violence. And I think stories like 'The Urchin' which you mentioned do demonstrate this particular dilemma in the South African problem. I think they are useful stories in terms of showing, in effect, the sort of possibly suicidal tendencies that can be nurtured within the community itself.

FLORENCE AKST

Well, certainly in 'The Urchin' you have a small boy who is already a member of a really violent, almost vicious gang, with ambitions to join the grown-up gang which will be even more violent and more self-destructive. At the end, his mother is calling for him to come home as though he was any small street child and not one who has already been almost perverted by the circumstances, saying: 'Hi, that child will one day bring me trouble' whereas we, the reader, have that awful feeling that we know he has gone beyond that point already and his mother doesn't know that.

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes. The point that has been made by sociologists, psychologists and so on about the South African child is that he is, in fact, an adult long before he should be. There isn't really any transitional period from infancy through to adulthood, there is just no time to enjoy childhood. You are thrust into the arena of life, into the "university of the streets", long before anything else, to go and survive as best you can. And, in fact, one of the central preoccupations that seem to me to run through all these stories is the whole theme of survival. I think this is one of the unifying things about the stories as I have tried to collate them here.

FLORENCE AKST

I was delighted to see that some of the authors that you have collected are people that I hadn't heard of and it has given me a chance to meet them, and they are the ones that I went straight for: Gladys Thomas, for instance, people who present fairly ordinary characters and show people without any extraordinary

gifts contending with the realities of life - that I found very impressive.

MBULELO MZAMANE

Indeed, and in fact this is one of the most impressive features about the short story as it has come particularly from the Western Cape, from what I describe in the anthology as a 'District Six School'. The Capetown area has in fact a longer tradition with people like Alex La Guma. Very low key. Very ordinary characters. And it is precisely, I think, in their choice of these very ordinary characters that their exceptional subtlety as well as depth lies. It reminds you, doesn't it, in some parts of some of Camus' and Kafka's characters - there is nothing extraordinary about them. There is much more that you could do about that kind of character than you could do about your kind of Aristotelian hero, as it were.

FLORENCE AKST

Now, tell me, you are a writer of short stories, you have told me that you write whort stories every week

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes indeed I do.

FLORENCE AKST

What sort of constraints, and what sort of discipline and why do people write short stories?

MBULELO MZAMANE

In the South African context it has been argued that a short story is sometimes used as a short cut.

FLORENCE AKST

To what? From where to where?

MBULELO MZAMANE

Towards expressing a very urgently felt problem.

FLORENCE AKST

So that if I have something that I want to communicate to you urgently there is no point in me sitting down and spending two years writing and then looking for a publisher.

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes. So the immediacy of the problem recommends the short story. Indeed recommends poetry too. That is why, in fact, people have tended to excel more in these two genres. We have, of course, also tried to see that this kind of viewing of things can be exceedingly detrimental towards the would-be novelist as well

because everyone has tended to say: "OK, we are repressed, we don't have the time, the leisure, to sit down and write novels or write short stories". So that whereas on the one hand it has given real impetus to the growth and the development of the short stories it has tended to stunt the growth, the development, of the novel form. It is really only very recently, particularly after Soweto, that we almost all of us decided: "Look, we can write novels", that novels by the great Russian authors, for instance, were written under considerable severe constrictions and we are constraining ourselves by making believe that it is so bad that we can't in fact go over towards a more protracted piece, as it were.

FLORENCE AKST

And I think that I remember you saying when we met before when you were taking part in an 'Arts in Africa' programme that you actually wanted to make sure you recorded everything of an event, and that the novel gave you the extended documentation.

MBULELO MZAMANE

Yes. It seems that you can do that in the novel. That is why my structure of that particular novel is so episodic. You see, in a novel form you can put in a scene that is really seriously speaking peripheral, but if you have considerable craftsmanship you can, as the scene develops, integrate it into the totality of what you want to do. Whereas the disciplines of the short story, demand that you pursue this central preoccupation with a single-mindedness, and the success or otherwise of the short story will depend on your not deviating from the central preoccupation - it's like writing a good one-act play or a good poem.

FLORENCE AKST

The theme of all the stories in 'Hungry Flames' is the oppression that people have suffered. Has it been the oppression itself that has lead to such a flowering of literature, such a feeling of urgency to put pen to paper and express people's feelings in writing?

MBULELO MZAMANE

I think there is something irrepressible about the human spirit, and this tends to assert itself more under oppressive conditions, under situations of social and political upheaval. I think the parallel can be drawn here with the black American experience, indeed with the Caribbean experience as well. The flowering of the tradition of the negro spiritual of black music in the diaspora, you recall, was very closely associated with the oppressive conditions under which the people were living. So it tends to be an outlet, I don't think in just escapist terms, but in creative terms. People in some ways are learning to cope, not to accommodate necessarily, but to cope with life, sometimes

to transcend the immediate. There must be that kind of vision where you can see ahead otherwise the whole thing becomes stifling and it becomes self-negating, a negation of life. I think art is an affirmation of life rather than the opposite.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the South African writer Mbulelo Mzamane, talking about literature and life in South Africa. And to end this edition of 'Arts and Africa', some music from South Africa. This is the choir of the Federation of South African Trade Unions, FOSATU, singing Ke FOSATU. Join us again next week for more of the Arts of Africa. For now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey in London saying goodbye.