

A CENTURY OF SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT STORIES

Introduced and edited by Jean Marquard, Ad. Donker/Publisher. Paperback R7,95.

Reviewed by Tony Voss

You know the old joke?

"They're pulling down the old pub! "

"Boo! "

"They're building a new one! "

"Hooray! "

"Only one bar? "

"Boo."

"Half a mile long."

"Hooray! "

"No barman."

"Boo."

"Fifty barmaids! "

"Hooray."

"They don't sell beer."

"Boo."

"They give it away free."

"Hooray."

etc.

Well:

"All the old South African short story anthologies are out of print or out of date, and the new ones are not comprehensive enough."

"Boo."

"Jean Marquard has produced a new one."

"Hooray"

"366 pages."

"Boo? "

"37 stories by 30 writers."

"Hooray."

"From 1895 . . ."

"Boo."

"To 1977."

"Hooray."

"Of the 30 writers, 15 are dead."

"Boo."

"The other 15 are still living."

"Hooray."

"Of these 15, 5 do not live in South Africa."

"Boo."

"The other ten do."

"Hooray! "

This generous collection, generous both in its offering of stories, and in Ms. Marquard's careful introduction deserves a cheerful response. The selection opens with William Charles Scully's "Umtagati" of 1895 and closes with Mbulelo Mzamane's "The Party" of 1977. The contrast between these two stories suggests that South African writers have written, as Joyce claimed to have done in **Dubliners**, "chapters in the moral history of their country", even if South Africa remains as divided as Joyce's Ireland. "Umtagati" (the title means "black magic" rather than simply "magic") turns on the use of a simple chemical experiment devised by a colonial civil servant and executed by his black messenger, to defeat ancient magic and uphold white rule. "The Party" concerns a group of black university students, two of whom are studying science. In one episode they are interrogated by the police:

Was it true, they asked, that we were being taught to manufacture small firearms and Molotov cocktails under the tutelage of American and British lecturers?

Ms. Marquard's selection makes many revealing juxtapositions possible and her introduction encourages critical reading.

The chronological range of the stories doesn't quite measure up to the century of the title, but the edition may justly claim that her selection covers a larger time-span than anything similar that has appeared. She suggests in her introduction that some previous collections have been limited by "the personal taste of the editor" or by an "educative" aim which meant that "pieces were chosen on the basis of their suitability for school or college courses". In my view, on the grounds of literary taste (as examples of a literary form or a good read), the stories in this collection by Fitzpatrick (1897), Glanville (1897), Cornell (1915), Gibbon (1918) and, perhaps, Cripps (1918), do not deserve the space (admittedly less than 30 pages) they occupy. But Ms. Marquard's aim has been "to meet the need for a comprehensive anthology of short stories

from Southern Africa." And who feels that need? Certainly teachers and pupils and lecturers and students. So Ms. Marquard's selection is illustrative, historical, and her introduction assumes an interest in the academic study of the short story. But that this book will or should reach a wide market in education does not mean that it has nothing to offer that person we're all longing to meet, the general reader. It has plenty, and Ms Marquard's introduction should be of wide critical interest, outside the strictly academic sphere.

For me, the collection is dominated by three persons: Pauline Smith, H. C. Bosman and Doris Lessing. It seems to me impossible to miss, reading through or dipping into this handsomely produced volume, the mastery of these three writers. Behind them, close behind them, come Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer, William Plomer, A. C. Jordan, Can Themba Bessie Head Ahmed Essop, Barney Simon and James Matthews. And Ms. Marquard's selection acknowledges precedence: only five writers (the three masters and Gordimer and Jacobson) are represented by more than one story. In the short story these writers have found a *métier*: in each of their stories, for good or ill, they strike their own individual note. This is true of other writers represented here (Jordan, Essop, Simon), but one needs the evidence of their collections of short stories to be convinced of their mastery.

You can usually hear how good a story is in the first sentence:

At Naudé, who had a wireless set, came into Jurie Steyn's voorkamer, where we were sitting waiting for the Government lorry from Bekkersdal, and gave us the latest news. (Bosman, "A Bekkersdal Marathon")

It came about, according to some tale, that there was a man named Nyengebule. (Jordan, "The Turban")

They were good, the years of ranging the bush over her father's farm which, like every white farm, was largely unused, broken only occasionally by small patches of cultivation. (Doris Lessing, "The Old Chief Mshlanga")

This assumption of the significance of what they have to say, of their characters, of the emotions of narrator, persona or writer, makes for the intensity and economy of the best short stories. They concentrate, in a spirit of creative or imaginative provincialism, on the matter in hand, and by the close attention to the manner of their telling, to the universals of the story-teller's art, can reach the widest audience. One Doris Lessing story, for example, ("The Old Chief Mshlanga") has all the ecology of Jack Cope's "The

Little Stint" (a ponderous story, he could have been better represented), all the childhood evocation of Uys Krige's "The Coffin" (a fairly ponderous story) and most of the politics and psychology of Peter Wilhelm's "Pyro Protram" (a pretty smart story), and more besides.

There is a significant contradiction at the centre of this book: although it is called **A Century of South African Short Stories**, Ms. Marquard claims in her introduction to have prepared "a comprehensive anthology of short stories from southern Africa." (My emphasis.) Is South equal or not equal to Southern? What exactly are some of us writing/reading/talking about, others fighting for, others paying taxes to? While Babel lasts it is difficult to see how we can do without nations and attempts to make South Africa one of them. Certainly only the South African economy in Southern Africa could produce such a book as Ms. Marquard's for its home market. And she acknowledges in her introduction that she has

been obliged in this edition [there's hope in that phrase] to exclude the work of several distinguished writers – particularly Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex la Guma, Lewis Nkosi – because at present their works are banned in South Africa.

And Can Themba's vivid, lucid, scary story, "The Suit", appears only thanks to the Secretary for Justice, R.S.A. The most powerful writer in the volume, Doris Lessing, is not now and never has been a South African.

As with all the best writers in this selection, the sense of place in Doris Lessing's stories is very strong indeed: and that place is not South Africa. This is noticeable also by contrast with those writers who evoke South Africa so particularly: Pauline Smith and Bosman especially, whose rural fictions, as Ms. Marquard remarks of the latter, have "the power to alter the map of a country by creating archetypes from that country's raw materials." But these stories evoke the urban scene as well. Peter Abrahams's "One of the Three", of 1942, is the first urban story: but there are also the township of Can Themba, the suburbs of James Matthews and Richard Rive, and the periurban areas of Sheila Roberts. A subtle transmogrification of setting takes place in Peter Wilhelm's story. And Mbulelo Mzamane's story is not set in South Africa, but his characters spend rands, smoke Van Rijn and drink Oudemeester.

One of the most satisfying things about Ms. Marquard's book is that it shows the variousness of the short story writer's art, from fireside folk-tale to fictional autobiography. I hope it runs to another edition and that by then Ms. Marquard's choice will be unrestricted. □