

Realities of society in motion
Conversations with the Muse with Phillip Chidavaenzi
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GOING through 'amaBooks' latest offering, Short Writings from Bulawayo III, I could not help but recall a remark made by one literary critic -- that 'progressive literature' responds to society's demands as of 'now', and not 'then'.

Here, the realities of society are captured in motion, as they happen, with the socio-economic hardships in Zimbabwe today continuing to offer a fertile template for literary works.

The short stories and poetry collected here are a reflection of the diversity of cultures, races and generations from which Zimbabwean writers come. Noteworthy too, is the fact that some of the writers had just been passing through Zimbabwe, adding a deeper dimension to the anthology, as they offer an outsider's perspectives. At a time when major publishers find it more rewarding and making 'business sense' to publish established---read 'easily marketable'---authors and 'fast-selling' textbooks, 'amaBooks have to be commended for giving upcoming writers a chance to break into the limelight. They have given a whole new generation of Zimbabwean writers that could have remained in the wilderness the space to display their 'wares' and in the process make their claim on Zimbabwe's literary space.

Tinashe Mushakavanhu, Farai Mpofu, Adrian Ashley and Deon Marcus belong to the fourth generation of Zimbabwean writers. This is a generation that---like its predecessor generation of the likes of Zvisinei Sandi, Ruzvidzo Mupfudza, Wonder Guchu, Nhamo Mhiripiri and Robert Muponde trapped in a "publishing jinx" (M. Chirere, The Saturday Herald, July 23 2005)---that could also have been condemned into oblivion. These are products of the ambitious British Council and Lancaster University writing project, Crossing Borders and---through all the three editions of Short Writings from Bulawayo---have announced their arrival, and continue to enjoy the sun, on the literary scene.

With Mushakavanhu's The Harare Hermit, Judy Maphosa's One by One My Leaves Fall, Mpofu's Your Burden, Mlalazi's enigmatically titled id i, and Ashley's The Request, they give incisive insights into the hardships people grapple with today, from battling to eke out a living in the city, right through a mother's agony as HIV and Aids claims all her children, a friend's battle with insanity, haunting memories of the dissident era in Matabeleland to a man's daily struggles to provide for his family. In-between are fairly unknown voices, represented by the likes of Mary Ndlovu, John Simcoe Read, Godfrey Sibanda and Cornelius Sanders. But the instalments in this collection are in no way meagre. If anything, the diversity they add makes the anthology all the richer.

Mary Ndlovu explores the generation gap in Hands, where a father and his son's discussion about contemporary politics and socio-economic dynamics in Zimbabwe is very illuminating. Read contributes to the poetry dimension with Butterflies Drift into the Edges of our City Life. Sibanda, in Itekiya, bemoans the collapse of a nation's systems,

which should allow it to function properly, with everyone wanting a 'kick-back' to do their job.

The voices of experience---well represented here by Pathisa Nyathi, Albert Nyathi, Catherine Buckle, John Eppel, Ignatius Mabasa and Brian Chikwava---add the cutting edge to this fine collection.

From the history of the City of Kings, the abuse of essential public health facilities, prostitution against a backdrop of HIV and Aids, the retracing of one's footsteps back to their childhood and the battle to fit in into the patterns of city life are all issues explored here.

But whenever a collection of this nature is put together, questions will always be raised about the quality of all the stories and the pedigree of all the writers. No doubt, this anthology boasts of writers of international repute, with compact profiles, but there are also other new---fairly unknown, too---voices. In that regard, the appeal of some of the stories is not very strong, with some of them reading like mere 'gap fillers', and others reading like mere political statements, pandering to neo-liberal whims.

In some of the cases, the writers tend to lose the opportunity to do justice to otherwise interesting topics.

Other stories to look forward to in this collection include The Boy with a Crooked Head (Thabisani Ndlovu), The Rhythm of Life (Byrony Rheam), Cain and Abel (Raiselon Baya), and The Concert (Mzana Mthimkhulu).

Till next time, keep reading