

Together: Stories and Poems by Julius Chingono and John Eppel

Reviewed by Emmanuel Sigauke on Wealth of Ideas

One question I remember asking in the late eighties and early nineties in Zimbabwe is: Where are all the white writers? I could easily have concluded that Zimbabwe had no white writers, or that white Zimbabweans could not write. But I remembered that when I started school in the 70s, before Zimbabwe's independence, I had read stories and poems by white writers in school. So, as works by black writers flourished in the eighties, what was happening to works by white writers? John Eppel hints at one of the many possible answers in a short essay in the poetry collection, 'State of the Nation': "None of the Zimbabwean presses would publish me; none of the South African presses. Influential academics (and editors) of anthologies, not only at home but in those countries starched with political correctness like post-independent South Africa, Germany, Canada, and England, dismissed me as morally questionable or simply ignored me."

I remember seeing Eppel at writers' meetings. I remember his [then] explosive poetry renditions, and when I travelled to Bulawayo to launch the city's branch of the Budding Writers of Zimbabwe, he was in the group of participants. He might not have been published, but he was there, together with others, participating, seeking publication, like most of us were. But where were all the other white writers? It's one of those questions that would not yield a clear answer in racially divided Zimbabwe, but things have gotten better, Zimbabweans have learned to work together in the face of the country's crises. And there is no greater witness for this --in literary circles-- than the landmark work 'Together', a publication in which two writers, one black, one white, came together to publish a book. Most of the anthologies published in the country after 2000 show diversity.

'Together' is here. It was co-published by amaBooks (Zimbabwe) and UNO Press (USA). Shortly after, the South African edition followed. Another demonstration of togetherness, of collaboration, among publishers. The book starts with Julius Chingono's writings followed by John Eppel's. It's a beautiful book; I have read from it at different poetry events in Sacramento. I have proudly carried it around. It is one of very few Zimbabwean books published in the USA, so there is pride in that. I love that it's locally available, easy to order in bulk, if needed. Many readers will love it for its humor, the kind of humor salvaged in a place where hope is uncertain. Then there is satire, and, even more surprisingly, blatant criticism of governmental authority. To me, the writings are so sad I missed much of the humor on the first reading.

Chingono's poems tend to be short and incisive. He grabs my attention immediately with "Curiosity", the first entry in the book, about a "He" who heard gunfire outside, opened his door and "never saw / the bullet / that killed his curiosity." The poem reminded me of a childhood friend I lost in the seventies; he was only twelve, but because of his height, he was allowed to attend those all-night party indoctrination (pungwes). The base was ambushed, and as the people took cover and started crawling away, as they had been trained, my friend stood up to take a look at how well the brothers, the comrades, were firing, and a bullet got him and he died. A good work of art has the ability to transcend time, to be applicable to situations in different places. Nothing would stop this poem to resonate with anyone in Sacramento or Oakland, where shootings are common.

Chingono's story "Leave my Bible Alone" features Mudhara Gore, a drunkard who would do anything to keep his Bible, his most valued possession. Even though this is more of an incident than a fully rendered story (you get the sense that there is a lot more that's left unsaid), the piece hints at the state of affairs in the country.

The most moving moment for me is not when the Gore falls and inadvertently releases the grip on his bible, nor is it when his wife carries him home in the family wheelbarrow; it is when this specific incident is introduced, in the middle of the story: "Gore joined the usual company of old time guzzlers. At this time backyard drinking joints selling illicit alcohol had sprouted up all over, as municipal beer halls were not operating and legal alcohol was too expensive... Afraid that the drinking hole would be raided by the police at any time, Gore and his friends hastily downed two 750ml bottles of kachasu. They parted in very good spirits, their bibles clutched to their chests." It's not even the social value of alcohol consumption that matters now, but the rapid guzzling meant to bury the larger problems of life. And right here in this paragraph you get the sense that people find solace in two major outlets, alcohol and church, and just as illicit alcohol places have sprouted, so have churches of all sorts and descriptions. Beer and bible are pronounced in the same breath in this story.

In the short story "We Waited", Chingono uses the voice of witness, which maintains the humor element we see in the poetry and his other stories. This is a story of the voter's voice not being respected, of the abuse of the electorate, but amidst such injustices, the voice manages to make us laugh: "We waited. We joked that the weather had joined the British and the Americans in imposing sanctions on us." Over and over again, the Zimbabwean writer has begun to tap into the humorous in the national rhetoric. It comes off as satire, yet too dire to always solicit our laughter with its humor element. The tragic looms larger: "We sat on rubble as we waited, rubble of the buildings destroyed during Murambatsvina when the shelters of the poor people who could not construct permanent structures were demolished by the government. We waited, keen to exercise our right to vote in the Goredema town council elections, a fledgling town west of Harare." Here, not only does the narrator assume I need a definition of Murambatsvina, he also reveals the exact location of Goredema in relation to Harare.

If the narrator is not reporting to a foreign audience, he is perhaps talking to posterity, future readers of this story who may not remember the time, or, suppose Goredema collapses altogether one day, given the rate of destruction in the world of this story, then it helps to offer level of specificity; it contextualizes the story and help reader visualize setting. But that's not all; there is a deep subjective interpretation of his world; the narrator tells the story as it is, from the way he sees it. He tells it in such a natural voice that he probably wouldn't care about the invasive editorial italicization of his points of reference: murambatsvina, maputi, freezits, since his exposition is so clear that italics or not, the the details would still make sense to the reader. Anyway, things don't go on well in "We Waited." They wait for nothing; they don't get to vote for the candidate they want, and their demonstration ends with tragic encounter with riot police.

The voice of witness also narrates "The Dread Gentleman", telling us of transport woes and other hardships the people are experiencing in the country. Commuters wait for hours at the bus terminus: "Fuel was in short supply and government was contiually 'in the process' [sic] of sourcing foreign currency to buy the precious liquid." Although the voice is still communal, talking about the experiences of the "we", the story introduces a specific individual, an object of everyone's curiosity. He too has been affected by the tsunami, which the narrator explains as "the wanton destruction of buidings by the government, named after the tsunami that devastated East Asia and Africa." The narrator, ever generous with detail, adds, " Most emergent business people had their place of work destroyed in the wave of politically motivated destruction carried out by the government to weed out dissent among the urban populace."

This reads like the prose straight out of the independent press' critique of government activities. Perhaps in a place where the

press cannot report freely, literature begins to play the role of the independent press, and as readers, we are likely to accept the journalistic details that temporarily delay the story, or we accept that the reporting is the story. This is a common thread throughout this book and other works coming out of this period of Zimbabwean life; the voice of witness, the voice seeking what seems like a distant audience, the voice that's a cry for some intervention, the see-what-they-are-doing to us voice. It is hard to ignore; you connect with at an emotional level, and what you may suspend isn't disbelief but art.

The stories in the anthologies published in the first decade of this century carry this voice; voices reporting Zimbabwe, voices, in the words of NoViolet Bulawayo, "penning Zimbabwe". Perhaps the uniformity of reportage in most stories is a function of the limited publication opportunities in the country; the stories become an identity not so much of the writers but of the one or two publishers selecting the stories that tell the story of Zimbabwe's lost decade. As I have devoured these stories, I have also always felt that the full story, in its complexity, has not yet been told, and I don't want our publishing industry to make the mistakes made in the eighties, of pushing a uniform literature of liberation, laudatory poetry and blame-casting fiction chosen by just a few editors; some of the works then were driven by the euphoria of independence, and this guaranteed them a spot on the national curriculum. Those works that didn't fit in these modes were not promoted, were rejected, or banned. "

"The Dread Gentleman" is also about survival. Chingono gives us a snapshot of how people are making ends meet through the parallel market. One example is the sudden emergence, an eruption really, of projects like Sams Electrical Investment, where "we buy and sell all electrical goods. we repair stoves, irons, hitters and all domestic and industry requirements. And all kinds of risk watches." During the decade of Zimbabwe's hardship, many

outsiders wondered how people survived, their source of resilience. In this story, Chingono attempts to answer that question. Talking about the crowds who have gathered to support dread gentleman's new enterprise, the narrator says, "They were a peace-loving people who did not retaliate with violence. They did not believe in the old law--an eye for an eye. They did not believe in destructive engagement." Assuming a voice of the voiceless stance, Chingono writes: "They knew that the authorities destroyed their homes, factories, offices, stores, butcheries...They destroyed their small vending markets, their livelihood, without compensation." The critique gets even more stinging: " They knew the government was a soulless machine that did not have blood flowing through its veins. That had not eyes. No ears. That had no heart."

Chingono's poems reveal their truths through humor and conciseness. His short stories, most of them short, are conveyed through the expository voice whose urgent need is to chronicle the experiences of their characters. These are stories whose strength is in content, not so much in form. Collectively, they are a memoir of the Norton community, yet the experiences of these people resonated throughout the country, and they grip the attention of readers anywhere. The collective voice is like a call awaiting our response, a voice seeking to awaken our humanitarian impulses. For other writers, the stories are a storehouse, a documentations of experiences that could trigger other stories, filtered through diverse artistic voices.

John Eppel, on the other hand, experiments with different writing techniques, especially in his poetry, whether he is writing a satire or a sestina, a haiku or quatrain. In fiction, his prose is highly readable, and the narrative is suspenseful, but the content often is presented in a rawness that begs for more filtering or execution. I haven't read his novels yet, and when I do, I will start with the one about the English teacher.

In the poem "Afrika" Eppel features a debate on naming, identity, and progress. One voice questions the use of the letter 'k' to replace

the 'c': "Do you think, by spelling out it with a 'k' / that you will make it...well..more Afrikan?" This is a serious question in a world where names are used to show many interpretations of identity and belonging; and the naming system as it relates to Africa and its Diaspora has been used to establish ideas of authenticity, or in some cases, to establish a sense of sovereignty and independence, or just to negate past systems and administrations. Street names have been changed from those of former foreign settlers to those of the new African leadership. There have been jokes about a four-way intersection where all the street signs bear the name of the country's president, confusing motorists and pedestrians alike. In the poem, the voice in stanza two tries to address the questions asked in stanza one: "Look, friend, sacrifices have to be made.../..let's make a start...let's spell it with a 'k'.

And what's in a name? A lot, no doubt. Even Livingstone was quick to name the Victoria Falls out of his queen, and to this day, that's the name used. And as names are changed, what harm is in that? Not changing names has been known to benefit tourism in some circles, but in others, name change or not, nothing seems to have benefitted the people. That's perhaps the message at the core of the poem, as is hinted in these lines: "[Do you think] calling it Robert Mugabe Way / instead of Grey Street.../...the vendors squatting underneath the sign / will somehow earn more money down the line?" It leaves one to wonder what question the persona would have asked back when it was still Grey. But as the persona points out, parenthetically, like an aside, "What's in a man?" And the question that's not asked is "What's in a woman?"

The story that follows this poem also centers on a debate. "Debate" ridicules the whole idea of a debate in the context of Zimbabwean politics. It's a caricature of the debaters, whose real life identities the narrator does not work hard to conceal. It's a play (a word that will matter in the next story) on the Mbeki-led Zimbabwe talks, and it is very entertaining. That's what it is, entertainment,

presented in inventive prose, but too much of a joke that evaporates soon after you finish reading. The story echoes the familiar sayings in Zimbabwean leadership circles. We can easily tell who Comrade Nod; he blames the problems of his country on former colonial powers and on America. He says, "The colonial sun set a long time ago; in 1980....and hence Iwe will never be a colony again." Mr Nod does not believe the country deserves sanctions because the country he leads is "very African and sovereign." Then when he ends his speech, he shouts some slogans presented in an ungrammatical medley of Shona and English, which I suspect has nothing to do with the caricature of the speakers: "pamberi the economy, pasi the drought, pasi sanctions, pamberi...er...me". And all the Shona words are italicized, consistent with someconventions, but the issue here is, seriously, that's how the character said it? It definitely has to be part of the caricature: not only are these leaders so articulate in English as they dismiss British imperial tendencies; they are also...inarticulate in their use of Shona. The story succeeds, however, in expressing the author's feelings about the political situation in the country.

The poem 'The Coming of the Rain' is clever. The sarcastic element that builds to the satiric tone serves the intention of the poem. Usually, in a place like Zimbabwe, the rains bring hope. In this poem, the coming of the rain is the only thing that endangers this society, not lack of freedom of speech, not the absence of freewill, not bondage and oppression...just the rain. The next poem, "Ghostly Galleon", deals with that familiar image of the Chinese ship bringing weapons to Zimbabwe. The poet praises Durban Dockers' Union for denying the ship entry. The celebratory tone is short-lived because "the ghostly galleon will be back-- / terror is here to stay". This is consistent with John Eppel's view, expressed in the essay I mentioned earlier, that Zimbabwe has not experienced real freedom since the Smith regime, but in reading these poems and stories, you get the impression that the situation

has worsened in the Mugabe years; the euphoria of the eighties was shortlived, and for some, independence never came.

The fast-paced story "Democracy at Work and at Play" approaches brilliance in the art of pastiche, or more appropriately, in what Henry Louis Gates calls signifying. In short, Eppel signifies on Yvonne Vera's work. Signifying includes a level of acknowledgement and appreciation of another author's work with some room to mock it; it's like a game, which might cause wounds, but in the bigger scheme of literary things, it adds to the value of literary engagement among authors or their works. Here Eppel critiques the occasionally unusual use of English in Vera's 'The Stone Virgins', questioning the awkward use of prepositions, what the protagonist calls "faulty grammar and mixed metaphors". The POV narrator seems to ridicule Benate's obsessive appreciation of Vera's work. He has an MA in Vera, and now is thinking of pursuing his doctorate with an emphasis on Vera again. The working title for his dissertation is Democracy at Work and at Play: The Subversive Function of Faulty Grammar and Mixed Metaphors in Yvonne Vera. Eppel believes that Vera's treatment of Gukurahundi in 'The Stone Virgins' is cowardly; it does not capture the horror, and you can see the same view expressed in this short story. I liked, however, how the story communicates with Vera's novel, and I feel we need more of such. Works of literature are related in many ways and at many levels; each work contributes to the multiple perspectives that form a literary tradition. Unfortunately, I couldn't find my copy of Vera's novel to compare notes with Eppel.

Eppel enters the non-fictional, reporter mode we saw earlier in Chingono. Once we reach the piece "Discarded", we are no longer pretending to be in the world of fiction. Reality has taken over, we are in the world of ZANU PF and MDC, political campaigns, AK 47s and Bloody Diamonds. I am reminded of that Orhan Pamuk narrator who abandons the story, and asks the author to just

finish, to tell the reader details in the raw. Here, it's as if Eppel have contended with the fact that reality is more fictional than fiction in some situations. It's a story-telling mode he has perfected over the years. Perhaps that's the courage he wanted to see in Yvonne Vera? Forget art; tell us what happened. It's a matter of immediacy, the courage to capture the dangerous as it happens.

The editors concluded the book with one of the best Eppel poems, "Waiting". The topic of waiting is one of the thematic similarities between Chingono and Eppel in 'Together'. In Chingono voters are made to wait and wait, until disaster strikes before they even cast their votes, that deadly shift from ballot to bullet. In Eppel's "Waiting", we count the frangipani leaves while explosions from the neighbours' burning rubbish trigger memories of the so-called Rhodesia bush war, which led to the independence of a country in which votes don't count anymore. But where there is hope there is waiting, so we wait, until the narrator tells us, ""The falling leaves remind me / that the day has come and gone for ballots / to be counted, results announced, and I'm / afraid that change will never come." And as long as we know we are afraid, we also know that we can learn not to be afraid; some have called it the gift of fear.

Together, John Eppel and Julius Chingono chronicle the lives of Zimbabweans going through a difficult decade. In their unique ways, these authors bring the reader closer to what was happening in the country, and their collaborative voice is a courageous plunge into subjects many artists often dread. In their statements of necessity, literary craft was not always as critical as conveying the content. It is certainly a book to read, if not for the issues and style, then most definitely for the spirit of the project, the need for collaborative work not only among writers from the same country, but writers across color lines. And given where we are in human development, it's a shame that we have just discovered--in the past decade-- the beauty and strength in working together. In the words of Na'ima Robert, author of 'Far From Home', " if we are to survive

as a pluralistic, tolerant nation, we must be able to weave a coherent national narrative, a common ground, a shared history, in light of [our] differences." Togetherness is Zimbabwe's literary imperative.

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