

**Together.** Stories and Poems by Julius Chingono and John Eppel

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In a groundbreaking joint publication project involving two Zimbabwean writers (one black and the other white), as well as three publishers, **Together** reflects the innovation that went into this collaboration, emerging as a refreshing and highly symbolic text. It presents short stories and poems by two veteran writers, disturbing the racial and political polarities that have come to characterize the rule of ZANU PF. Both writers strike the pose of a jester in their views of the Zimbabwean "crisis."

Following the axiom that the truth is told in jokes, both writers use humour as social commentary to explore shared abject poverty, shortages of basic commodities, state brutality, the travesty of justice, the abuse of political power as well as the complicity of the oppressed in their oppression. The two poke fun at the "absurd" that has been normalised. Focus is on the everydayness of life to illustrate that in a country characterised by extremist attitudes, the truth lies in between; that in fact, the very stuff of everyday life exposes the vacuity that so characterises the rhetoric of racial and political extremism.

Chingono uses a deceptively simple style. His sympathies, like those of Eppel, lie with the poor and downtrodden who may be wantonly killed in cross-fire, kept waiting by politicians only interested in getting votes, made poor and hungry through political machinations or have their houses bulldozed by the government in a "clean-up" exercise. Yet in this depressing and depraved condition, Chingono sees the funny side of life, for example in the stories "Shonongoro" and "The Toilet Issue." One senses though, an underlying sadness threatening to cloud the humour. The metal number plate of a car that makes up part of a shack door in the poem "20-044L;" the jostling for space in a bus in "At the Bus Station", and the emptiness of greetings occasioned by extreme deprivation in "Greetings" all suggest a deep-seated sadness from which one of the means of escape is alcoholism. In "We Waited" Chingono employs that archetypal trope of waiting in Zimbabwean literature as epitomised by Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain*. The waiting in this context is symbolic not only of arrested development but decay, entrapment and destruction.

John Eppel's wit is more direct and acerbic. Most of his pieces speak of deprivation. The first, "Malnourished Sonnet" signals his keen sense of observation, especially the dearth of responsible leadership. The poem "Afrika" shows such vacuity as does "Culture." Eppel exposes the ridiculous or absurd in Zimbabwean politics. In "The Debate," the three candidates are battling to see who will be "allowed to dish out cabinet posts, including the newly established, and coveted one, of Minister of Rural Beauty Pageants." Of interest to Eppel as well is Zimbabwe's troubled past, especially Gukurahundi in the pieces "Democracy at work and at

Play,” “Broke Buttock Blues”, and “Bhalagwe Blues”. The writer exposes the hypocrisy of the country’s leadership in attempting to erase large scale state perpetrated murder that was ethnically motivated.

The only thing that short story enthusiasts may be disappointed with is that the stories tend to be anecdotal with not much attention to development of character and as such emerge as “sketches”. Perhaps that is the result of their expository mode. It is difficult though, to fault the poems. Overall, Chingono and Eppel not only remind us of a hard time in Zimbabwe’s history but also remind us that the bond of suffering that Zimbabweans share has a common source of misery – a corrupt self-serving oligarchy. The bond of suffering also suggests a wider conception of nation beyond race, ethnicity and political affiliation.

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