

Zim writers document 'lost decade'

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IN spite of the warnings and advice of our teachers and parents never to judge a book by its cover, it would be difficult to ignore Veena Bhana's cover design, based on a sculpture by Arlington Muzondo, for amaBooks of Bulawayo's latest collection of short stories, *Where to Now?*

The earthy colours and ancient striations of the stone carving give more than a hint of the dreams, aspirations and adventures of some of Zimbabwe's most important writers, all to be found within this slim volume. Most of the writings in this collection have been inspired by events taking place between 2000 and 2010, a time that has come to be called Zimbabwe's "lost decade". These were the years of violence, inflation and economic collapse, when many fled to the diaspora, seeking new livelihoods and ways to support their siblings and the ageing parents they left behind. These stories are important in their placing of Zimbabwe in a history of events, that will determine all our futures, and eventually provide an answer to the question "where to now?" Although the writers deal with serious issues, a light touch and sense of comedy often temper the darkness and despair wrought by poverty in the lives of the characters. In *Tomato Stakes*, John Eppel describes school holidays spent with his friend Lofty Pienaar in his parents' house, a pondok made of burlap coal bags sewn together that "flapped" in the wind. Adventures trapping mice in the bush and swimming in algae-infested reservoirs ended when the boys left school. Lofty trained at Gwebi Agricultural College and became a successful commercial farmer. When the farm invasions began, he was left with a mere 10 acres of his original 350-acre spread at Umgusa. The resourceful Lofty, like a character from *Boys Own Adventures*, then embarked on a five-year plan to grow *catha edulis*, a tree whose leaves and bark are used to make Bushman's Tea, a stimulating beverage with medicinal properties. Rejoicing that Lofty has remained on the land, and will be able to support his wife and four children, the reader is astounded by a turn of events in the narrative. The outcome is as shocking as it was unexpected. "Your white masters must be delighted with you!" Mark hissed into my ear as we filed out of the general manager's office into the wide corridor, is the intriguing first sentence in a story by Mzana Mthimkulu,

entitled *I am an African, am I?* Accused by his work mates of being un-African and a sell-out because he eats sadza with a knife and fork and because he returns his unused fuel allocation to his white boss, Timothy begins to question himself and his motives as a purchasing manager in a beer brewing company. When a colleague accuses him of preferring to watch satellite TV to visiting his relatives in the townships and rural areas, he takes this criticism to heart. Loading his Mazda 626 with two bags of mealie-meal, he drives to Pumula Township to visit his aunt. Delighted, the aunt calls down blessings on Timothy. He eventually returns to the city, happy that the spirits of his ancestors have spoken to him: He resolves in future to give up golf in favour of family visits. Like an enticing box of chocolates, there are many more stories in this collection to read and enjoy at leisure. *Where to Now?* is to be launched next year by Parthian Books, one of Wales' most respected publishers. Both amaBooks and Parthian are diverse and contemporary in their range. Publishing a wide variety of novels, short stories, poetry, local history and culture titles, they provide encouragement and support for many of Zimbabwe's established and budding writers. - (You can also visit the publisher's website: www.amabooksbyo.com)

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(<http://www.financialgazette.co.zw/weekend-gazette/10873-zim-writers-document-lost-decade.html>)