

Title: Dancing with Life: Tales from the Township

Author: Christopher Mlalazi

Publisher: 'amaBooks

Genre: Fiction



This collection of eleven “tales from the township” extends what has become something of a tradition in post-independence Zimbabwean writing: vignettes of urban life, generally of the deprived classes, which focus on individual lives in the midst of economic decline and state terrorism.

It’s a genre that seems to exist in the cracks between public imageries, to want to be a little inconspicuous. While generally avoiding overt political critique, these snapshots of the often shattered lives of township denizens nevertheless show the marks of political abuse in every daily transaction.

Christopher Mlalazi’s collection is like this, too. The stories vary between twenty and two pages, the characters are generally dislocated, their dilemmas torn between scratching out a living and pursuing relationships in an environment where families have collapsed, infidelity is endemic, and traditional spiritual beliefs persist into modern fragmentation. Some of the stories might be termed social realist; a couple are livelier in venturing into

imaginative satire. At its best, this bites strongly.

In “Matchstick Man” the eponymous protagonist lights the fires of resistance to the state: “They beat the fire with acid statements in the state media. They tear gassed it, set police dogs on it, truncheoned it, shot at it, and, finally, the two lions subdued it at the palace door. They put it in a straitjacket, raked its face with their sharp claws, drawing blood, then carried it away still struggling to an unnamed grave deep in the sacred forest behind the palace, in which, it was rumoured, resided the maimed spirits of silencing.”

Another satirical squib, “Election Day”, lampoons an unnamed dictator’s terror of losing an election; while it’s quite funny, it relies on a fairly crude twist in the tail. Another brief vignette, “The Bulldozers are Coming”, is set against the background of Murambatsvina (Operation Clean-Up), like Valerie Tagwira’s recent novel, *The Uncertainty of Hope*.

It portrays one woman’s personal tragedy as the direct result of government oppression, which is of course quite legitimate, even necessary, but it sacrifices complex individuality and characterisation for making its blunt point.

Mlalazi’s prose is generally serviceable rather than inventive. The undeniable courage of societal and political critique

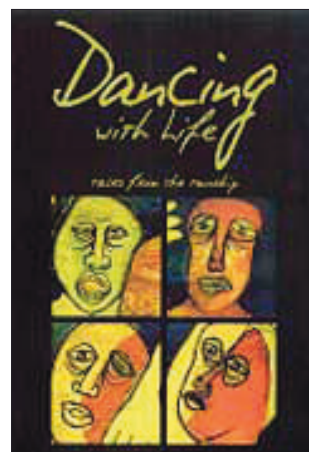
– in Mlalazi’s case from an occasionally explicitly Ndebele viewpoint – is pervasive, but falls short of a far-reaching historical density, and of ever daring to actually name the ultimate culprits: Mugabe and his party henchmen.

This work is still a little shy, a little fearful of retribution, a little unambitious in its scope. Still, it is also not just about politics, but centrally about the tangled lives of ordinary people.

That said, Mlalazi has extended himself further than many of his contemporaries, and observed his world sharply. One looks forward to more writing from this new talent. **W**

Reviewer: Dan Wylie

Dan teaches literature at Rhodes University.



Markovits does a fine job of detailing Annabella’s self-deception and doubt, as, after an initial refusal of Byron’s offer, she convinces herself that she’ll be the one to change the poet’s mercurial nature, although she knows he does not truly love her. At one point she’s honest enough to admit to herself that she’s thrilled to be marrying “a famous man”.

A swift and low-key marriage ensues, and Annabella’s multitude of doubts are not eased when her new husband states: “I fear very much that you will find out you have married a devil.” And it seems that she has. Their honeymoon is the stuff of nightmares, and Annabella instantly finds herself out of her depth, dealing with her husband’s heavy

drinking, debilitating depression, sexual demands and cruel, manipulative tactics.

Desperate for a lifeline, she clings to the relationship she’s forged with his somewhat lackadaisical sister, Augusta. But Byron and Augusta’s connection is far from normal, undercut as it is with a secretive, scandalous history, and Annabella soon finds her morals and conscience severely compromised.

The novel is split into three parts: Courtship, Marriage and Separation. By far the most compelling is the section detailing the marriage, as Byron’s true character is violently revealed to Annabella and she is forced to face her self-deluding nature and contend with her husband’s cruelty and incestuous relationship.

Although beautifully written in places, some readers may be put off by Markovits’s somewhat dense style – there are areas of the text where solid blocks of prose are rarely broken by dialogue, most notably in the first section. However, *A Quiet Adjustment*, together with the first in the trilogy *Imposture*, will be of great interest to those who enjoy historical fiction, or readers with even a passing interest in the poet’s life. It’s not necessary to read the first in the trilogy, or to have background knowledge of Byron’s life to appreciate the novel. **W**

REVIEWER: Sarah Lotz

Sarah is the author of *Pompidou Posse* (Penguin, 2008), and *Exhibit A* (Penguin