

The Zimbabwean

Dancing with Life: Tales from the Township

Christopher Mlalazi

Reviewed by Beaven Tapureta

Reading *Dancing with Life* is like walking on a suspended tightrope, arms of the mind spread apart so as not to lose equilibrium, looking down on Mlalazi's characters as they struggle to survive in today's Zimbabwe.

You certainly don't want to fall into their lives, but you are transported right into the township.

As you finish the first story, *Broken Wings*, you can't help the tears forming in your eyes. Nozitha the teenage caregiver suffers right in front of you. She collects the family ration of food aid and takes care of her mother and grandmother who are both AIDS victims. Her grandfather Siziba is too weak to help himself. Abisha, a food aid worker, as if he cares, asks, "Where is God then? Tell me, you who believe, when people as young as this girl have to suffer like this."

But, he is a wolf in sheep's clothing - he rapes Nozitha, after tempting her with a bottle of cooking oil that she would already have received had Sibiya, the village's party supremo, not demanded from Nozitha her grandfather's ruling party membership card, which she did not have with her. As a girl child exposed to the vagaries of politicized food aid and hypocrisy, Nozitha embodies, frighteningly, the suffering of Zimbabwe's women. AIDS has come to devour all, directly or indirectly, and now left are only too many Nozithas, just too many 'mothers of enemies', orphans of the endless war.

Election Day satirically exposes a leader who seems rash. Instead of accepting advice from his personal advisor about what was happening outside, His Excellency says to him, "Now, let me give you some free advice, my personal advisor. Your assessment of the povu is very wrong, just like judging the sweetness of an orange by its skin or that of a woman by the shape of her hips." But, come Election Day, the household of His Excellency is in panic. Knowing that her husband's fate will also be her own, Modi thinks of sneaking to "the coffee plantation in South America or the castle in Belgium." But in a twist of the plot, the 'impossible' happens; Modi's husband wins the election.

The *Border Jumper* illustrates vividly what happens when there is strife and people are disillusioned, made to believe that nothing good will ever come from their own land. Zenzo and Vusa represent the shattered dreams of young people crossing to South Africa through illegal means, despite the crocodiles in the Limpopo, the patrolling police and the demanding 'guides', hoping to find new hope on the other side of the border. Mbedzi, who guides the illegal migrants, knows why he must play his part. He prays to the departed spirits to "also grant them a safe haven from the poverty they are fleeing."

One of the unforgettable episodes in recent Zimbabwe history, Operation Murambatsvina, or Operation Clean Up, is featured in *The Bulldozers Are Coming*. As always, it is the women who carry the brunt of the suffering and pain. Left alone at home, her husband far away, the woman in the story is confronted with a moment of indecision.

The bulldozers will not be lenient, she has to act fast. Even the old woman next door has already started to pull the roof down on her own to try to save her few possessions. Here, the author shows a world ruined, a place of misery.

The title story, *Dancing with Life*, pictures the life of Mxolisi, representative of the many disillusioned, unemployed ex-university students in Zimbabwe. At 21, Mxolisi chain smokes marijuana, and plays hide and seek with the police. He knows that it is the economic meltdown that has put him in this jam, forcing him to dance with life.

Mlalazi's writing is particularly outstanding when he uses humour to tackle serious themes, such as in the stories *Eeish!*, *When The Fish Caught Him*, *A Heart in My Hole* and *Fragments*. In *Eeish!* Ndla lives through his father's drunkenness and his memory of witnessing his mother's infidelity. He befriends a white soldier in the Zimbabwean army, Craig, who moves into the township. Craig encourages him to join the army or the National Youth Service. Ndla is unimpressed: "And throw stones at the white farmers while the children of chiefs get premature potbellies at Fort Hare University?"

The story titled *The Matchstick Man* is allegorical and complex, with the Matchstick Man fighting for his freedom from the 'granite bull', 'lions in diamond-studded leather collars', 'cockroaches carrying AK47 rifles' and 'obese gun-toting rats'. Matchstick Man is a rebel. When the fire engine is sent to put out Matchstick Man's fire, he responds, "Where is the fire? For I do not see it." And he is told, "It's in your crazy head!"

Dancing With Life engages the mind, ruffles it, and uses the language of today's Zimbabwe, township life booming with crime, prostitution, joy, misery, and naked political falsehoods.