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PETER FINCH

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Zim - Just About Hanging On

Reading about a million percent inflation is one thing. Dealing with it is something else. In Bulawayo, south west Zimbabwe, largest city in Matabeleland, there's a publisher who has given up the idea of selling books for money. What's the point, Brian Jones tells me, you get a cheque from the bookseller, the bank takes a week to clear it and by that time inflation has made it worthless. Bulawayo might be away from Mugabe's sight but not his touch.

'AmaBooks hangs in by its teeth. Those and the dedication of its owners Jane and Brian who see literature as the one salve still available to them in a universally deteriorating world. Long Time Coming, their latest collection of "short writings from Zimbabwe" offers a snapshot of what, with considerable understatement, they call "this turbulent period in history". The book has been financed by the Swedes, the French and the Dutch. The British Embassy loaned a laptop. Production was not without its challenges. 'Ama's computers blew when the electricity supply surged to levels dangerous enough to fry birds. Power cuts, locally known as "load shedding" have proved impossible to contain. The telephone and email have collapsed. Transformers blow up spectacularly and are visible for miles across the bush. Paper is as rare as a caring state.

When the books do appear selling them is not even contemplable. If the choice is between a book or a loaf of bread then the bread always wins. Brian and Jane give their publications away instead. Back at base the water supply, delivered via electric pump from a borehole, has ceased. No power. Outside a bush fire rages. Beyond cholera threatens. Living on the surface of Mars would be easier. But 'ama continues because its owners won't give up.

In the new book are a fair roster of Welsh authors – visitors to Zimbabwe who have managed workshops there and written about the country, its colonial past and its medieval present. Ian Rowlands, Lloyd Robson, Owen Sheers. Among the native contributions reality stands behind a thin fictional veneer. But the horrors are obvious.

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Christopher Mlalazi, Raisedon Baya and Mathew Chokuwenga are brave men. Already Mugabe’s thought police have closed down Mlalazi and Baya’s play Crocodile of the Zambezi. But they’ve yet to get to Long Time Coming.

In these bleak stories death stands everywhere – AIDS, drought, disenfranchisement, desperation. Western political freedom has not worked for Zimbabwe. “Bloody men. Bloody chicken buses. Bloody poverty. Bloody Zimbabwe”, writes Linda Msebele in a tale where water supply fails, shoppers riot and days fill with violence and repression. Yet even she manages to end on a flicker of hope. Light remains in the human soul. Ama Books need all the support they can get. Try the African Books Collective or Amazon. Try now.

An earlier version of this piece appeared as *The Insider* in the Western Mail

POSTED BY PETER FINCH AT 16:22

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