

Together reviewed by Liesl Jobson.

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'Together' is perhaps the most remarkable book I've read in the last year, lending credence to the certainty that stories insist on being told, especially those stories that the authorities deny. Published by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press [in South Africa, by the University of New Orleans Press in North America and by amaBooks in Zimbabwe and elsewhere], 'Together' is a collection of poems, flash fiction and short stories. It comes from distinguished Zimbabwean writers, the late Julius Chingono and John Eppel. It will shake you to your core, exploring as it does the travesties of justice done to the authors' fellow countrymen and women under the rule of Robert Mugabe.

Bearing witness to the elusive nature of and power of story-telling is Eppel's poem 'Haiku with One Extra Syllable':

All stories are true  
Even those that didn't happen  
Once upon a time

That extra syllable in the middle line that exists despite the rules of the form symbolises the nub of discomfiting narratives. However, it is the very urge to tell one's story that will not go away. How do writers write when the threat to those who express their discontent looms hideous and terrifying? This question is subtly encapsulated in Chingono's brief poem 'A Buzz'

Art does not thrive  
on half truths  
like politics,  
prepare the real thing  
honey!

The two writers form a formidable duet and the various narrators that people the poems and stories in 'Together' refuse to be silenced. The late Chingono, who was a rock blaster in the mines for many years, teamed up with Eppel, a high school English teacher from Bulawayo in 2007 and the end result is this stunning publication. All the more stunning because as you reel from an account of brutal intimidation as in the story of election violence, 'We Waited', you are suddenly relieved by tales of extraordinary existence, entirely unrelated to trauma. Woven in the mix are stories of football shenanigans and big game hunters, tender love poems and reflections on birds and flowers, wacky eccentrics and the loss of a false tooth. One of the highlights for me is Chingono's hilarious account of a briefcase businessman who, taking a call on his cell phone, borrows a pen from the poet who is immersed in scribbling a new poem. The narrator notes wryly

I lost a verse  
he got an order.

Chingono's writing forms the first half of the book, Eppel's makes up the rest. Formally a stylist, Eppel's voice is wry, sardonic and ironic. His reflection on the cheeky white madam is a playful dig at the resilience of those who remain in Zimbabwe and survive with their racism intact despite all. His poem 'He Shakes More Than He Can Hold' is a poignant expression of the anguish of writing these dark stories and 'Broke Buttock Blues' is a stylized call and refrain lamenting the tortured body and soul. Covering the taboo of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade massacres at Gukhuraundi post-independence, this collection is not for the faint of heart. It is however a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity of writers to make meaning when this is denied, to transform suffering into art and to survive despite the grimmest encounters. Harrowing and haunting, but also beautiful and most surprisingly tender, 'Together' offers the reader a chance to hold on to hope when everything seems to be most horribly undone.