

Fools of darkness?

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"Is there ever an excuse for ignorance? And when the victims spit upon victims should they not be called fools? Fools of darkness? Should they not be trampled upon?"

The questions, which have immediate contemporary relevance, are asked by Zani Vuthela in "Fools", the longest of the stories in Njabulo Ndebele's prize-winning collection. "Fools" is centred on Charterston location during 1966 and told from the perspective of "Tee", a teacher who, like many of the older characters in Ndebele's fictional world, is a failure, Tee is an impotent lover, an unappreciative husband, a thief and a rapist. He has much to learn from Zani, the alert concerned attractive young man who returns from school in Swaziland determined to make contact with the township community, particularly its younger members.

Towards the end of "Fools" Zani upbraids a township crowd which has gathered outside a picnic ground, It is Dinganes's /day and the despicable school principal who is involved in organizing the picnic is still demanding the full gate fee even though the function has been in progress for some time. Zani points out that the community should fight for its rights and says: "The first is the right to lead full lives. You all know what the meaning of this day is, and instead of coming here to dance away our lives, we should be at home trying to figure out how to win our rights back?"

The Principal gets his come-uppance after a stone he hurls at Zani hits a Boer's car. Despite craven apologies, "Please my great king, please ...", the Boer insults the Principal, "people who go to the toilet should aim well", and lashes him with his whip. Before turning on the silent, blinking Tee. Ndebele allows Tee to win a moral victory" a vicious beating, absorbs the pain and laughs; the power seeps from the Boer's blows and the assailant weeps. "The blows stopped; and Tee knew he had crushed him. Tee had crushed him with the sheer force of his presence. Tee was there and would be there to the end of time; a perpetual symbol of the Boer's failure to have a world without him".

Such miraculous victories over white oppressors are rare in Ndebele's work, for his particular interest is in exploring the tensions in township life and in showing boys learning and leading. He is fascinated by the power exerted by peer groups and parents, and anxious to show how young people. Often privileged children, move through a cauldron of emotions and run the dangers of the street to gain new insights and understanding.

He shows over and over again that South Africa is awaiting an eruption; it is as if the Great Rift Valley were about to extend itself to move again, as if two great plates covering the planet's surface were about to shift, inaugurating a period of violence and destruction. Ndebele is an appropriately youthful poet of Soweto and prophet of '86, his heroes are, for the most part, very young, and he wisely focuses on the township and the school. Writing of the sixties he provides a vivid picture of the forces which were at work in the seventies and which are still at work in the eighties.

In the stories, “the Prophetess” and “The Music of the Violin”, schoolboys learn to see through superstition and to challenge the bourgeois values of the parents. In the riches piece in the collection, “Uncle”, he alters his usual perspective and explores the impact of a creative, perceptive relative on the life of a young boy.

When Uncle visits Charterston, he crosses the township bully over a woman, outwits him in a street fight and points to a moral with far more reaching implications: “Remember the king of the Basotho, King Moshoeshoe? Remember how he defeated the Boers by rolling rocks at them from the top of the mountain of Thaba Bosiu? Their guns, their cannons were nothing compared to the terrible descent of the rocks. You must know that mountain all your life. It is the fortress of the greatest wisdom: living with the Earth.”

The story ends with a vision of the township community briefly united through music, but the narrative and Uncle’s words have established a rather different image which dominates Ndebele’s view of South African life – that of a volcano, so long as one knows what one is fighting for, knows the mountain, and knows who the fools are, there will be times when dancing is appropriate.