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# Women like Winnie

## THE CRY OF WINNIE MANDELA

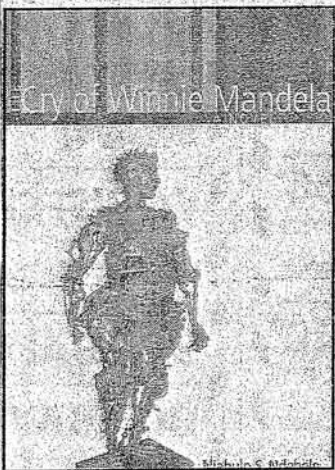
by Njabulo S Ndebele (David Phillip)

NJABULO S Ndebele's latest work, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, is not a biography but a factional contemplation of the theme of African women waiting for the return of their men – dispersed for reasons of work, exile, study.

Ndebele, the distinguished author of *Fools and Other Stories* spins *The Cry* around the lives of four women who, like Penelope in Homer's epic, waited for the return of their Odysseuses.

Years on, suitors came for Penelope. "She spurned them all" and was rewarded in the end.

All four women in Ndebele's tale, however, break Penelope's law. One goes looking for her husband; another



falls pregnant; the third succumbs to bitterness; and the last emotionally abandons her sleep-around husband.

The author wants a consideration of why women wait and what happens to them and the one away; he asks for reflection on the fact that people do change. Women, perhaps more so than men, hold on to the integrity of the man at departure (the idea of him at that time) – in other words they are more faithful, as it has

for the longest time been expected by society. Yet they too change and stray, albeit sometimes after years of hope and the death of what was. As such, one of the women asks: "Are we really a gathering of waiting women or a gathering of women in mourning?"

Purged by their painful soliloquies, they proceed to talk about Winnie (as in *Maximise*) – the woman who waited in public. And eventually they prod her for her take on waiting. What starts as a quest to understand Winnie ends in what sounds like an indictment. And Winnie herself muses that maybe she should have waited outside the prison gates for her man. Instead, she went in to get him – a revolutionary act altogether un-Penelope-like.

Ndebele evidently did not interview Madikizela-Mandela; nor did he get her blessing for his particular factional take on how she experienced waiting. *The Cry*, therefore, is a bold plunge that will generate debate, or at least frowns.

Cornelius Thomas