

## Tales Out Of School

### A review of *Fools and Other Stories*

#### J.M.Coetzee writing in *The New Republic* 1986.

When the history of the last years of white rule in South Africa comes one day to be written, the year 1976 will loom large. For in the national uprisings of 1976 a powerful new (and endlessly renewable) force entered the fray: a generation of politicized black children impatient with what they saw as the capitulation of their parents to apartheid, and heedless of life and limb. It was the younger brothers and sisters of these same children, better organised, better led, who brought the machinery of local administration to an abrupt stop in 1985, turned the black townships into a battlefield, put a sudden (and in many cases brutally chilling) brake on the process of co-optation and bribery by which the government planned to turn a growing black middle class into a buffer between white comfort and black anger, and precipitated a crisis of confidence that has crippled the national economy.

The uprisings of 1976 gave a new spur to black writing, and soon novels set in the battle-torn townships were appearing from such writers as Mongane Serote (*To Every Birth Its Blood*) and Sipho Sepamla (*A Ride on the Whirlwind*). There was a flood, too, of theatrical performances – in the improvisational mode known as “township drama” – and poetry readings, with much of the poetry finding its way into the pages of the Johannesburg-based journal *Staffrider*.

Among the young writers who emerged in the wake of 1976 was Njabulo Ndebele. His first collection, *Fools and Other Stories*, which came out in South Africa in 1983, has now appeared in the United States. At first glance Ndebele seems to have little in common with his engagé contemporaries. His stories deal with the lives not of revolutionaries, but of young children. They are set not in the Soweto of 1976, but in a placid-seeming township near Nigel in the Transvaal, in the early 1960s. The figures he analyzes are not militants and security policemen, but a generation of parents and a generation of children. In addition Ndebele writes the clean, polished English of someone who is clearly not only at home in the language but has passed through an orthodox literary apprenticeship (he in fact holds graduate degrees from British and American universities). This is in striking contrast to writers of the Soweto school, whose language spiked with township slang and vernacular turns of phrase, unliterary to the point of being anti-literary and even subliterate, is as much the legacy of poor schooling in a linguistically segregated society as it is an affirmation of proletarian origins.

But we are entirely mistaken if we conclude that what was going on in respectable black homes in Transvaal towns of the 1960s is of no relevance to the South Africa of our times. Ndebele’s stories are about the coming to consciousness of his generation, the generation born around 1953, the year in which Hendrik Verwoerd, then minister of native affairs, closed independent (usually mission – run) schools for blacks and imposed across the country a network of schools peddling a body of knowledge called “Bantu Education”, which was designed to fit black children for the lower echelons of the economy as well as to convert them to the Afrikaner’s vision of South Africa’s past and future. It was against Bantu Education, carried out in schools chronically overcrowded and underfunded, that the children marched in 1976. The vast, suffocating body of Bantu Education, under another

name still sprawls across the country in 1986. It is the ever-present background (though not the subject) of Ndebele's stories.

Bantu Education is particularly the background of the long story that gives the collection its title. Zamani is a teacher in a grade school. Once regarded by the children with awe and even fear, he has in middle age grown into a demoralized drunkard and womanizer. He has lost his wife's respect and lives under the thumbs of his school principal – a man who has sold himself to the system to the extent of hanging a portrait of Verwoed in his office – and other black officials and policemen paid to enforce the white man's law. It is 1966, a time of stagnation and seeming hopelessness: the Dutch Reformed Church casts its shadow over the township, the pressure of apartheid lies heavily on all.

Into Zamani's life comes Zani, a South African student home from the school he attends in Swaziland. A lonely figure in the somnolent township, Zani brings with him strange new ideas that we now recognize as tenets of the Black Consciousness movement, ideas about the antiquity and continuity of African thought, about a time-perspective in which Western colonialism and Western Christianity are only a transitory episode in African history. Zamani, who has fathered and repudiated an illegitimate child, is attracted to the young man as to a son, despite the latter's somewhat puritanical disdain of him. He puts his job at risk by allowing Zani to address his students and urge them not to celebrate the white man's nationalistic holidays. He himself takes Zani's words seriously more seriously than he will consciously allow; at the end of the story it is he and he alone who stands firm under the lash of a white bully's whip.

What the young man has more or less haphazardly taught Zamani is not only to be a man and an African again, but to reassume the vocation he has abandoned, that of teacher and healer of his people. The writer whose influence is clearest on Ndebele at this point is the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah, who similarly links the rediscovery and teaching of the true history of a people with the healing of a wounded social psyche and the recovery of genuine independence. (The storyteller is in Armah's view the person best fitted to perform this healing role in modern society.)

Ndebele's story unavoidably brings to mind Dostoyevsky's Russia, a land of penniless clerks and apathetic serfs where feverish and prophetic young men wander about preaching strange ideas and exhorting the people to awaken. Zamani in particular is a Dostoyevskian holy fool, a man with a dark past that seems to have included rape and sadism. An unlikely healer of his people, he is a living paradox – "lovable evil," as Zani's girlfriend puts it.

Ndebele's greatest strength here is his sense of the mysterious depths of the self, it does considerable violence to a character like Zamani to say that he simply represents the last generation of the black intelligentsia before 1976 – a generation that on the one hand had lost touch with an authentic African past, and yet on the other had found its way into the future blocked by racist bureaucrats for whom Westernized Africans were not only a threat to white jobs but freaks, offenses against God and nature; a generation of which the writer Can Themba (1924 -68), drinking himself to death in exile in Swaziland, was an emblematic figure. Zamani *is* such a person; but he is himself as well, and his inner life – in particular his painful love of the wife he has betrayed – is fully and sympathetically realized.

The children who are the main actors in the other four stories of the collection are similarly realized from the inside out. In "The Music of the Violin" a well-to-do arriviste black couple, for reasons of

social prestige, make their son take violin lessons. Through the streets of the township the boy trudges with his violin, burning under the gibes of loitering teenage thugs. The violin soon becomes the intolerable badge of a foreign culture and a suspect class, and the sign of his parents' shallow aspiration that he rise, if not *past* the system (as child prodigies are now and then allowed to do), then *through* the system. Yet when the boy finally summons up enough courage to announce to his parents, before their shocked guests, that he will no longer play the violin, it is the parents' pain and indignation on which the story focuses. Trapped in the ghetto that apartheid has prescribed for them, they must confront the fact that their money cannot buy their children a passport out of the ghetto; as the wailing mother puts it, the street has prevailed over the home.

Street and home are in fact the two opposing zones in which Ndebele's stories are played out. The home is a zone of order and security, usually created by the hard work and self-sacrifice of a woman. The street, contested by criminal gangs and police patrols, is a zone of disorder and insecurity, though also of vitality. Between these zones Ndebele's children move, trying to satisfy the demands of the home without transgressing the norms of the street. The task is, of course, impossible to fulfil for any length of time: one of the irrationalities the stories point to is that by providing no space in society into which black children could advance, apartheid forced them all into the street, where they formed themselves into the army that is at present besieging apartheid's bastions.

Perhaps the best realized of all the stories in the collection is the briefest, "The Prophetess". A small boy is sent out by his mother to fetch a bottle of holy water from the local prophetess. (Not that the mother doesn't trust Western medicine: she is in fact a nurse. She merely wants to cover all the possibilities.) The prophetess, a disturbing old woman who lives on the far side of the township in a house always in semidarkness, sings a song over the boy that he understand not at all, embraces him with a strangely penetrative touch, and send him home with the holy water. But on the way back he has a brush with street life and the bottle is broken. With a self-assurance that surprised him, he fills a new bottle with water from a faucet and takes it to his mother. As she drinks it she feels (or imagines she feels) the pain begin to subside; and at that moment, healing his mother, the boy suddenly knows that he has taken a step toward adulthood and the vocation of healer.

The least satisfying of the stories is "The Uncle", a kind of dry run for "Fools". Both of these stories are about middle-aged teacher figures. But whereas in the latter story Ndebele performs the narration from inside the complex and tormented adult consciousness of Zamani, in "The Uncle" he does it from the viewpoint of a young boy, to whom the uncle, who arrives out of the blue to practice the trumpet and conduct complicated rituals of body cleansing in the bathtub, is simply a figure of wonder. The boy drinks in his uncle's disquisitions on African philosophy, religion, and history; but along what personal road the uncle arrived at his realization that knowledge of Egyptian Hieroglyphics is the firmest base from which to recover an African identity, or what such a quest must have entailed in modern-day South Africa, the child doesn't have the wit to ask. Though the story again exhibits Ndebele's feel for the texture of childhood experience, in this case the child's-eye view turns out to be merely the external view, the easy option.

It is instructive to compare Ndebele with such contemporaries of his as Mtutuzeli Matshoba whose collection of stories *Call Me Not a Man* first brought him into prominence in 1979, and Mbulelo Mzamane (Mzala [1980, *The Children of Soweto* [1982]). Matshoba and Mzamane are, in the terms I have used, street writers, for whom fictional energy is sparked by contact and conflict of the most

abrasive kind. Their literary descent is not from the Afro-Caribbean Négritude movement and the West African novel but from a homebred South African journalistic tradition of gritty realism. Their English is lavish, careless without nuance; in Mzamane's case it bears the marks of a second language.

Their stories are probably more in tune with the mood of the townships today – angry, impatient, violent – than are the stories in *Fools*, with their focus on inner states, on innocence and guilt, on self-discovery, on social tensions as experienced within the individual psyche. No doubt the fact that Ndebele does not live in South Africa has something to do with this – he is on the faculty of the University of Lesotho – though what his prophetess calls “the fire that is coming” by now flickers all over the subcontinent. Among present-day South African writers he reminds one most of the polished storyteller of Indian descent Ahmed Essop (*The Hajji and Other Stories* [1978]), though he does not have Essop's satiric flair.

There are several elements of Ndebele's stories with which one might find fault – what we have here, after all, is a first book by a young writer (though an extremely gifted one) working in a time of crisis that makes the heaviest of demands on the artist. Still, one observation is worth spelling out. The endings of the two longer stories, “The Uncle” and “Fools”, do not develop out of the logic of the action, but have the air of having been wilfully imposed. The stories with endings that work are the less ambitious ones – that is to say, those without novelistic ambitions, their feet firmly planted in the Chekhovian short-story tradition. Why should this be so? It seems to me that a feature of the South African novel for some while has been that its writers have not known how to end what they have begun, or what the times they are representing have begun for them. It is as though the end, the true and just end, has assumed the aspect of that which cannot be imagined, that which can be represented only in fantasy, whether dire or wishful.