

Fresh air and a couple of stories

"AMERICAN influence on South African writing is increasing all the time," says writer Njabulo Ndebele, whose book "Fools" has just been published by Ravan Press.

THE AUTHOR OF "FOOLS" SPEAKS ABOUT THE FORCES THAT SHAPED HIS LIFE

By Sally Adams

Ndebele speaks from experience, for he spent time teaching and studying in Denver. He is back in South Africa for a brief visit to launch his book.

In the quiet suburban house with stained glass windows which houses Ravan's offices, America seems far away. Over coffee, Ndebele describes the experiences that combined to give birth to his first book.

He was born in Johannesburg and later lived in Charterston Location in Nigel.

Charterston is the setting for the five stories that comprise "Fools". He writes of it with nostalgia, a nostalgia sharpened by a sense of enforced loss, for his family was made to move from there to Duduza, much further out of Nigel, and the old location no longer exists.

Now that he has finished studying and is married with children

Ndebele is putting down roots in Lesotho, where he lectures in literature at the University.

"I've grown to love it and I have a sense of being part of a nation. I'm absorbing a new culture," he says quietly without any visible signs of culture-shock.

Absorbing new cultures has been a part of his life. After finishing his first degree in Lesotho, he went to Cambridge University to do an MA.

It was a choice dictated by a sense of claustrophobia in South Africa.

"One gets so caught up in the problems, the oppression. I wanted to breathe some fresh air." A scholarship and the fact that there were no masters programmes in Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland aided the de-

cision.

Studying abroad proved to be no problem. His first degree, from the University of Lesotho, had prepared him well. His fellow students at Cambridge were "keen to exchange views and ask questions", unlike the American students he taught in later years at Denver.

Ndebele spent two years at Cambridge, where he completed two dissertations, one on James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" and one on Dostoyevsky.

Dostoyevsky might seem a far cry from Charterston, but for Ndebele his novels revealed a terrain that was "remarkably familiar". Themes like "the conflict between principle and the unpredictableness of human emo-

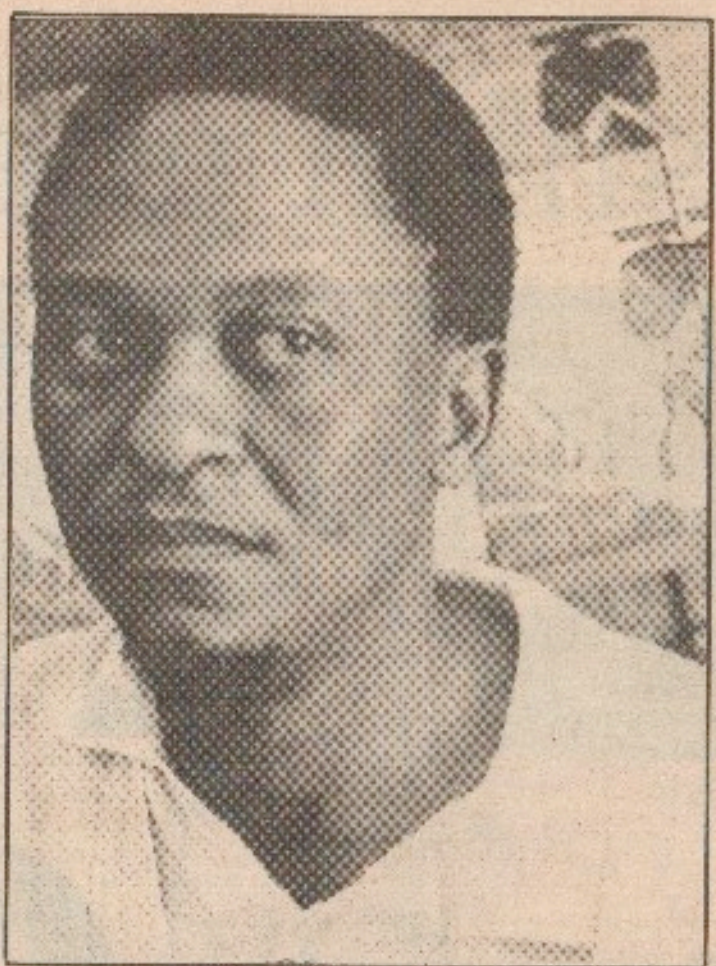
tion, and the conflict between individual inclination and principle" related to Ndebele's experiences back home in South Africa.

The American experience was rather different. He wasn't very impressed by American-style democracy.

"US democracy is superficial. True enough, everyone votes, but I still question it. US foreign policy is not democratic and reflects the internal situation. There is an underlying hypocrisy.

"I was horrified by the lack of depth in the mass media. There is a lack of unbiased commentary. This bias influences public opinion — people are constantly bombarded by this biased view. Small radio and TV stations do a tremendous job but they are so few, their influence is negligible."

At Denver University he found that the students did not have much social consciousness. "Many of them came to



Njabulo Ndebele: nostalgia sharpened by a sense of enforced loss

Denver for the skiing."

Closer to home, Ndebele turns a critical eye on white South African writers, who, he says, do not make him understand why white society behaves as it does.

"White writers still write like whites in Africa. The white social consciousness rests on the foundation that this is a European country in Africa, though they make statements to the contrary. It's a version

of the consciousness of the invader — there isn't a feeling of this is where we are."

The oppression that drove Ndebele to Cambridge for some fresh air is still here, obstructing the growth of culture.

"Where there is a merging of the two cultures, it hasn't been given official sanction so it can develop into something vigorous."

In the meantime,

Ndebele is full of plans for the future, undeterred by the slow development of Southern African literature.

He is working on two novels, and is busy writing more short stories. He wants to do some literary criticism on writing in South Africa. Translations are also on the agenda. He is planning to translate from English into Sesotho.

Lastly, he wants to write for children.