

A new black talent

FOOLS AND OTHER STORIES

Review by Jean Marquard

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These stories of African life in a Transvaal township herald the arrival of an important new talent on the local scene. Many African writers and critics have followed the idea, expressed forcefully by Mothobi Mutloatse in 1980, that in describing the black experience in SA writers should liberate themselves from the demands of formal or aesthetic considerations. Now Ndebele shows the power of formal disciplines for he writes as an author committed to his craft.

These stories are carefully structured and the characters portrayed in them are complex in terms of dialogue and linguistic design. The title story is a long one, almost a novella, exploring the crisis in a school teacher's life when in middle-age he is forced to confront his own inadequacies as worker, lover, friend and husband. A significant departure in Ndebele's approach is his determination to depict urban Africans not as victims of white oppression nor as puppets of white *baaskap* but as people first and foremost.

The township, Charterston Location in Nigel, is a community with strong ties of kinship and tradition. Standards of conduct between parents and their children or adolescents and their elders are maintained to form a strong, cohesive system of neighbourliness. An interesting detail, for instance, is the observation that a group of truant boys, bunking school for the day, automatically get up to vacate their seats on the bus for grown-ups. Rebelling against school thus does not mean that manners are forgotten. In 'Fools' one of the characters declares that the art of civilisation depends on understanding and dignity between individuals in the community. "And when victims spit upon victims, should they not be called fools? Fools of darkness".

In all these stories Ndebele focuses attention on concrete details of daily life. He records conversations, discussions over meals, childish diversions in the street. The buses are full of commuting workers who talk animatedly about matters of interest to the neighbours. His style is leisurely, relaxed with a strong sense of irony. But he is not lacking in passion and the mental anguish of the protagonist in the title story is its most compelling feature. Memories of township life in Nigel are clearly autobiographical as are the details about the struggles of professional black people to fulfil social and intellectual aspirations.

The fact that black lives in SA are inevitably structured around apartheid, and its bureaucratic tentacles, is never forgotten. It is as much an assumed background as the ocean is in Conrad. But Ndebele does not force political issues into the foreground. Instead he emphasises the point that black urban life has a style and resonance of its own. The white presence is scarcely evident in his stories. White power enters in the last story only as a red-faced "boer" brandishing a whip and demonstrating that brutality is ultimately an impotent form of power.

Ndebele's writing is subtle and graceful. He has a good sense of plot (an element not universally present in realist prose writing) and his dialogue is varied and lively. In 'The Test' a teenage boy undertakes a small trial of endurance to prove to himself that he can hold his own in the street gang to which he belongs; and in 'The Prophetess', a delicately written tale another young boy finds a way to express his deep love for his mother while at the same time he conquers his fear of the unknown. In 'The Music of the Violin' the music pupil rebels against his parents' snobbish adulation of classical music – which in their eyes is associated with the "uplifting of the black nation".

These vignettes offer hidden metaphors for some of the problems facing urban blacks in a racist society, but nowhere does the author spell them out. He is able, perhaps less in 'Uncle' than in the other stories, to sustain reader interest in small events and minor human failures. From this writer one may surely expect a novel in the near future.