

# Ndebele strikes a chord

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NJABULO Ndebele's new book of short stories brings with it an exhilarating current of fresh air. His prose raises our consciousness in a way we have not seen in a long time. Neither the Seventies nor this part of the Eighties have been blessed with Ndebele's solid, vibrant prose fiction, especially in the form of the short story. Sipho Sepamla, Bessie Head, Mtshuzeli Matsobha, Mitriam Tladi are exceptions only in the sense in which we speak of dramatic action and "busyness" of life portrayed in a sustained prose narrative.

Ndebele's prose, on the other hand, displays greater craftsmanship without sacrificing thought and feeling. No words are sent flying here, no verbal horseplay. Indeed this young writer (only 35), begins his stories in a low key and allows the story to build up to a pitch that gives you a sense of sublime bigness in the individual's life within the still bigger communal life. He leaves us pondering the wonder of childhood and its adventures and discoveries in relation to the stupidities, pompousness, snobbishness displayed by grown-ups.

"As he felt the first drops of rain on his bare arms, Thoba wondered if he should run home quickly before there was a downpour..." ("The Test"). "After school, Monday. A hot afternoon. Doksi, Wand and I are walking home. We are kicking things as we walk along..." ("Uncle"). "Vukani was doing homework in his bedroom when voices in the living room slowly filtered into his mind..."

I mean the stories do not begin with the kind of dramatic action that suggests the profound experience and meaning each story is going to unfold. The title story, Fool, also the longest in the book, and The Prophetess are the only

Professor E'skia Mphahlele (right) a professor in African literature is one of the most senior black educationists in the country. Widely read and just as equally published he is a respected literary internationally. Prof Mphahlele will be doing the occasional book review and literary piece for The SOWETAN as from today



reader "there's heavy stuff coming on here". The author's distinctive method is to carry us slowly into his story through a simple transparent diction. But we are compelled to keep reading as the diction measures the paces for us and we become emotionally involved with the life in the story. Yes, here is a master-craftsman at work.

But Ndebele is entertaining, too. Some of his characters and their situations show gentle and loving humour, but the writer's solid intellect maintains a proper balance between character, situation and action. There are no heroes here in the sense of the singular character who dares the world (or his society) with brave words and deeds and brilliant intellect. Ndebele portrays the life of a people in an urban location. Charterston (Nigel) now no more. No one is going to raze the ghetto to the ground or blow its walls to smithereens.

Life goes on, the people are simple without being simpletons. There is a culture here Ndebele tells us he is eager to depict. A confused survival culture, but still a way of life that has its own distinctive smells, sounds, daylight, sunsets, social relationships, preoccupations. This is the drama of African life that we all too often ignore in favour of the event touched off by racism, political action and so on. We forget that in spite of the "sys-

each other, we suffer but also endure, survive. Indeed the writer himself has publicly supported this vision of life through "positive protest". This portrays us as a people who should reaffirm our existence and dreams rather than as grovelling derelicts, perpetually humiliated, even childlike.

Ndebele can do this competently because, as he informs us, he is not writing primarily for the "human race", but rather for the immediate audience around him with whom a dialogue is possible because there are shared aspirations. And yet it is also true to say that the great writer possesses the instinct to create a work with local appeal that also strikes a common chord elsewhere in the wide wide world.

The long stories ("Uncle" and "Fools", because they are more ample, richer in texture and levels of experience the author portrays, engage the reader considerably. The little boy who hero-worships his trumpet-playing uncle grows up as the older man opens up his heart and mind to him. Grotesque things happen in locations (a more expressive name than "townships"). The bees upsetting and scattering communion in a church is only one of the many absurdities in our life. The boy's comment "and all the people who have come to receive Our Lord are leaving without Him" is at once

lesque feature of our life in which we often fail to get what we have long been queuing up for.

There are several fools in the second long story. None of them would even admit this. The teacher, who is the central figure, is the only one who is sharply aware of his own failures. The intensity of this awareness is his most painful burden, seldom elevating. The young activist rails against the people who don't share his sense of chaos and urgency in their lives. They are fools. But he is also a fool; he allows himself to be guided by his immature unrealistic fervour whenever he wants to incite trapped audiences into political action. The teacher's wife, for all her years of long-suffering during a barren married life (barren in more senses than one) turns out to have been a fool all along. Even now, in the final stages of her recognition, she will not leave her husband.

In effect, Ndebele is saying to us "this is our life, there are no straight answers for its hardships, its braveries and failures, its wisdom and foolishnesses".

There is the short story whose central theme is a political incident, or whose context is dominated by political action and speeches. Second, the story that takes the political conditions largely for granted. The author simply gets on with the business of creating something out of the human drama around us and in us, real or imagined. Third, the story that deals with political turbulence, but depicts our day-to-day existence so that politics do not claim all our attention. This existence is made up of our work, family activities, ideas, feelings and shows that even oppressed people have individual and social lives: we are caught up in a drama that is distinctively ours, even as