

Bound to engage and enrage

Chris Dunton

THE CRY OF WINNIE MANDELA
by Njabulo Ndebele (David Philip)

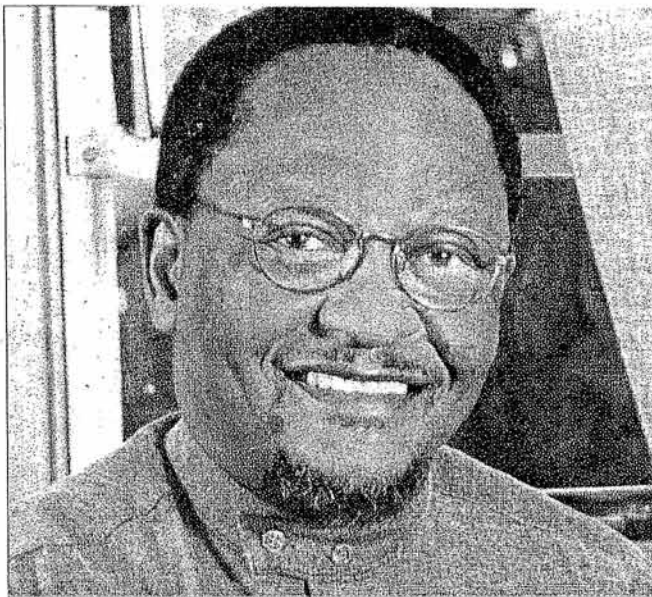
This is Njabulo Ndebele's first novel for adults and his first book publication of any kind in 12 years. Prior to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, there appeared his celebrated short-story collection, *Fools*; a children's tale, *Bonolo and the Peach Tree*; and *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, a collection of essays on the scope and social value of literary production that should be on the essential reading list for cultural studies worldwide — as simple as that.

In addition, in the past few years Ndebele has contributed fairly regularly to the South African press, writing on educational transformation and other national concerns, always combining a sensitively nuanced radical vision with a profound depth of insight into the issues involved and their conflicting variables. Poet and critic Peter Horn gets it right when he claims that Ndebele is "one of the most potent thinkers in the arena of cultural politics in Africa".

Ndebele begins *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by recalling Penelope, waiting year after year for the return from war and travel of her husband, Ulysses. Women, he notes, are "trapped in a social law", required to show "unwavering fidelity" to their husbands.

In South Africa, Ndebele suggests, Penelope's story has struck a special chord because of the absence of so many men as migrant workers or as apartheid exiles or detainees.

And so Ndebele creates the stories of four women, dubbed "Penelope's descendants". Mammele Mofolo's husband escapes the harsh conditions of rural Lesotho to become a miner and finally abandons his wife. The second story, Deli's, is one of self-denial: that of a woman who for many years supports her husband financially while he is studying abroad, only to be divorced by him when she becomes pregnant by another man. Patience Molete's husband is imprisoned on Robben Island. When released, he divorces her and becomes a high-ranking African National Congress official. Unable to bear this loss — anguished that he has now married a white woman — Patience suffers a series of



Njabulo Ndebele

nervous breakdowns. "I'm fine," her section concludes, "but insane." The fourth woman, Mara, loses her husband as he becomes increasingly promiscuous and corrupt, dying as "a washout, totally bereft of dignity".

These stories are told briefly, making up the first part of the novel. It is in the second part that the originality of Ndebele's conception strikes home.

The four abandoned women come to meet, regularly, over tea and scones. They discuss Winnie Mandela, who, like them, waited for her man but who, unlike them, carried out her waiting in public ("She could not escape the drama of public attention. She invited it"). One of the four women now proposes a game: each of them will enter into an imaginary conversation with Winnie. "Let's ask her something we deeply want to know about her thoughts and desires. You can also tell her a story. About yourself, for example. Or you can speculate with her about some aspect of her life. Or, we can invite her to address us."

Now the four stories we have heard in part one are consolidated, as the women give account of their experiences, their emotions and sexuality, their betrayal and, in some cases,

culpability. They reassess their lives by reflecting on Winnie's. And then they go further as, with immense thoughtfulness and insight, they explore the complex meanings and outcomes of Winnie's actions and her role in South Africa's history.

Finally comes the novel's longest and climactic chapter: Winnie's response to the women, in which she accounts for herself, her personality, her deeds, by interrogating her "alter ego". There are highly fraught episodes here — for example, her refusal either to justify or self-critique her conduct at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, or the passage (excerpted in these pages) in which she first meets Madiba and in which their attraction to each other first ignites. Winnie's self-account is a stunningly imagined section of the book, which will both engage and enrage many of its readers.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela transgresses the borders between fact and fiction, fusing aspects of the novel, biography and essay. It is a beautiful book, the writing lucid and quietly passionate, a work of deep intelligence.

Chris Dunton teaches literature at the National University of Lesotho

M&G

29-08-03 to
04-09-03