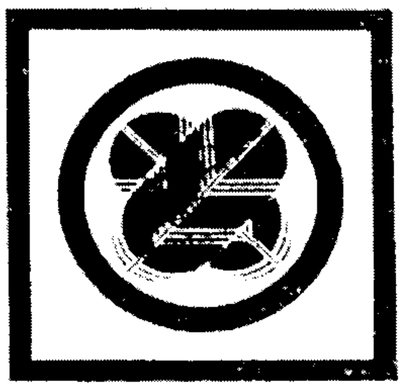
The Noma Award for Publishing in Africa



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NJABULO SIMAKAHLE NDEBELE (Joint winner of the 1984 Noma Award)

A biographical sketch

Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele was born on 4 July 1948 in Western Native Township, Johannesburg. The family moved to Charterston, a township outside the small Transvaal town of Niger, in 1954. This is the setting for all the stories in *Fools*, his first book. Apartheid, with its continuing policy of 'relocations' serving to rationalise and streamline the South African economy, has now destroyed both the communities in which the author's earliest years were spent.

Between 1961 and 1966 he attended St. Christopher's School in Swaziland as a boarder, studying for the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate. Thereafter he became a teacher in the coal-mining town of Witbank until 1968, when he resumed his studies.

He was living in Charterston, studying for British 'A' levels through SACHED (South Africa's anti-establishment correspondence college based in Johannesburg), when his first poem, "Looking At The Girl I Love" was published in *Classic*. Juvenilia in Zulu and English, including plays, had appeared earlier in his school magazine, and he was still working through influences as arbitrary as Dylan Thomas, whose *Under Milkwood* he imitated. From Lionel Abrahams, then editing *The Purple Renoster*, he had his first criticism in an exchange of letters which the two men recalled with some amusement during the launching of *Fools*.

In 1970 Njabulo Ndebele gained a place at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. By now he was writing a considerable volume of poetry and appearing frequently in *Classic*. A student publishing venture of his own, *Expression*, ran for two issues. He posted copies all over the world and still receives enquiries today.

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Leopold Senghor and Christopher Okigbo, in the meantime, became more important than Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot, and he was turning his attention to African writers. Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in particular, which he read in 1972, made a big impression.

In 1971 he married a fellow student, Mpho Malebo. She and their first child (a son) joined him in Cambridge in the U.K. in 1973-4, when he studied for the Tripos at Churchill College. James Joyce, whom he read in depth at Cambridge, was the major influence on this period of his development. Ndebele embarked on a novel which dealt with the old age of a protagonist whose entire life has been spent in a township. The chapter which survived from this uncompleted project is, he says, "a poor imitation of *Ulysses*".

In 1975 he began to lecture at the University of Lesotho. Some of the poems he had written in the late Sixties and early Seventies had by now appeared in the anthology *To Whom It May Concern*. He was later to tackle the ideological slant of that collection's title in a letter published in *Staffrider* magazine in 1983. (Vol. V, no.3). In a letter to Ravan Press, the publishers of *Staffrider*, he voiced his strong reservations about being included in a new anthology (for publication ten years after *To Whom It May Concern*) to be titled "Ask Any Black Man", since it carried the same connotations as did books by black writers a decade ago:

> Who should ask any black man? Surely not another African.
> We know and have known for centuries the agony of oppression.
> In that case, that pain, that agony has been explained enough.

He argued further that the suggested title for the collection was a residue of the past and not a spirit of the future, which subsequently prompted Ravan to re-title the book *The Return of the Amasi Bird*.

In July 1976 Njabulo Ndebele was one the writers who gave a paper at the landmark Institute of Black Studies conference in Johannesburg. There he met for the first time South African writers Es'kia ('Zeke') Mphahlele (then on a reconnaissance trip for what turned into a full-fledged return) and Sipho Sepamla. Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali he had met when the latter visited Lesotho, and Mongane Wally Serote at a SASO conference back in 1971. The local writer he knew best, and whose career most

closely parallels his own is Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, author of *Mzala* (published by Longman as *My Cousin Comes to Jo'burg*) and *The Children of Soweto*.

Another of the seminal events of 1976 (the year which saw the birth of his daughter, Makhosazana) was the arrival in Lesotho of the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, where he was to teach for two years. Armah stressed and demonstrated in his own writing the deliberateness of technique required, especially in longer works. Ndebele remembers the scope and intricacy of Armah's planning -- "the whole work laid out on the drawing board before a line is written". At this time, too, Ndebele embarked on another novel, destined to be condensed into a short story "The Music of the Violin", one of the stories in *Fools*.

Between 1979 and 1983 Ndebele, again accompanied by his family, studied for a Ph.D. at the University of Denver. American literature (he wrote the story "Uncle" while reading Faulkner), and a study of the black American experience were the new elements, but he also found himself reading Chaucer more closely than he ever had before.

In 1979 he became a citizen of Lesotho, and has now returned to the University of Lesotho to head the Department of English. In a recent critical review of contemporary South African writing he has drawn attention to a

> superficiality which comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can easily be characterised as good or evil, or, even more accurately, symbols of evil on the one hand, and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand. Thus as far as the former are concerned, we will find an array of 'sell-outs', 'baases', 'madams', policemen, cruel farmers and their overseers, bantustans, or township superintendents and their subordinate functionaries. On the other hand, the victims will be tsotsis, convicts, beggars, washerwomen, road-gang diggers, nightwatchmen, priests, shebeen kings and queens, and various kinds of 'law-abiding' citizens. All these symbols appear in most of our writings as finished products, often without a personal history. As such, they appear as mere ideas to be marshalled this way or that in a moral debate. Their *human* anonymity becomes the dialectical equivalent of the

> anonymity to which the oppressive system consigns millions of oppressed Africans. Thus, instead of clarifying the tragic human experience of oppression, such fiction becomes grounded in the very negation it seeks to transcend.

Njabulo Ndebele's Noma Award-winning *Fools and other Stories* was published by Ravan Press in 1983.