

Tin Roofs Among the Peach Trees

FOOLS

And Other Stories.

By Njabulo Ndebele.

280 pp. New York:

Readers International/Persea Books.

Cloth, \$14.95. Paper, \$7.95.

By Frank Tuohy

THE five tales in Njabulo Ndebele's "Fools and Other Stories" all have their setting in the African township near Johannesburg where the author was brought up. South Africa has produced a number of gifted writers but those best known to the rest of the world have been white. Most of the country's black writers have the problem that they are writing in a second language, but more strange to us is the fact that they are in the vanguard of a revolutionary situation: they cannot dodge the expectation that what they write will advance the cause, and anything else will be regarded as self-indulgence.

Nadine Gordimer, the leading novelist of white South Africa, in a recent essay titled "The Essential Gesture," speaks of her black contemporaries as willing "to discard the lantern of artistic truth that reveals human worth through human ambiguity, and see by the flames of burning vehicles only the strong, thick lines that draw heroes. To gain his freedom the writer must give up his freedom."

Nevertheless, Miss Gordimer finds that in the 1980's many black writers of quality "have begun to negotiate the right to their own, inner interpretation of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle." In a footnote she adds that Mr. Ndebele is one

Frank Tuohy's most recent book is his "Collected Stories."

of the writers who has done this.

Reading this first collection of his stories, one's initial impression of Mr. Ndebele — who has studied in Britain and America — is that he has resisted the more obvious pressures of revolutionary orthodoxy or partisanship. Whites only appear in the middle distance, yet there is nothing "folkish" about his portrayal of black society. His stories are set in the past: "Fools" the longest and most ambitious among them, takes place in 1966, and the others concern a world of childhood that could easily be the author's own. We don't, therefore, see the upsurge of violence of recent times, but are back in the period when white supremacy and ghetto deprivation were parts of a pattern that seemed unchanging.

In "The Test," a group of schoolboys, most of them ragged and barefoot, play soccer, take shelter from a cloudburst and test themselves by stripping off their shirts and running home through the freezing rain. Hardly a story at all, but a powerful evocation of atmosphere. The central character, the child Thoba, comes of a family of "higher-ups": his father is a teacher, his mother a staff nurse at the hospital, he himself owns three pairs of shoes. This family pattern is repeated with variations — we are not seeing the same people over and over again. In "The Prophetess," another small boy, braving the menace of rival street-gangs, visits the local wise woman to obtain holy water for his sick mother — another staff nurse. When the bottle breaks, he replaces it and brings ordinary water, and observes that no one is any the wiser. At this point we become thoroughly immersed in Mr. Ndebele's world, the township with its tin roofs, its peach trees and garbage dumps, the sense of risk and apprehension that overhangs the daily lives of these people.

Only the uncle, in the very fine story titled "Uncle," despite an aimless drunken existence, has a larger vision, and in another story, "The Music of the Violin," he

is favorably contrasted with a couple who have the conventional ambitions of the white bourgeois world. These snobbish parents insist that their son study the violin, though the boy hates it and is scared to carry it around with him in the street because his playmates make fun of him. When the child finally rebels, his mother's rage and sobbing turn "into the wail of the bereaved."

"Fools," the novella that takes up half the volume, offers similar characters, viewing them from an entirely different perspective — one that shows, I feel, a strong European influence.

WHEN I first saw him in the waiting room on platform one at Springs Station, I wanted to know him" — such an opening is in the classic mode. The narrator, a middle-aged schoolteacher, this time with a childless marriage, introduces himself to the well-dressed young man, Zani, who, it turns out, is the brother of the girl he has wronged. Conrad and Dostoyevsky come to mind as we read of these two men bound together in a strange relationship. The young man's ambitions are frustrated by those who follow the official policy of the white supremacists. "Is there ever an excuse for ignorance?" Zani asks. "And when victims spit upon victims, should they not be called fools?" Finally, in a Dostoyevskyan act of abasement, the teacher submits to a whipping by an enraged Boer.

To this reader, the high ambition of "Fools" is somehow less impressive than the more demotic approach (that suggests an American influence) of the other stories. But everything in this book demonstrates splendidly that as a writer Mr. Ndebele has chosen to make his own version of what Miss Gordimer called "the essential gesture." He is a witness, not of a moment of present history but of an extended period of time. And he convinces us of the genuineness of his vision in everything he writes. □