

THE HERALD

Serving the Eastern Cape since 1845

Newspaper House
19 Baakens Street, Port Elizabeth 6001
Private Bag X 6071, Port Elizabeth 6000
Telephone: (041) 5047911
Fax: (041) 5854966
E-mail: theherald@jchnnice.co.za

THE mere mention of the name of Winnie Mandela in this country excites wildly different passions.

On the one hand, there are those who would immediately draw attention to the violent and controversial actions of the Mandela Football Club and the death of Stompie Sepele and disappearance of other young boys, and her subsequent appearance in court on fraud charges as being enough to cast her into eternal damnation.

On the other, are those for whom she is an icon whose appearance however late or unscheduled is cause for wild jubilation; who is seen as the champion of the poor and homeless and the voice of the oppressed.

Rarely, however, is Mandela placed in historical context, against the background of the beautiful young woman from Bizana who married Nelson Mandela in what might well have been, under different circumstances, the society wedding of the decade and who was thrust into the centre of the political maelstrom when her husband was jailed for life at the Rivonia Trial.

What Ndebele does in this novel – he stresses that it is an “imaginary book” although it is an extraordinary weave of fact and speculative fact – is to try to provide some answers to the complexity that is Winnie Mandela.

The departure point is Penelope, who waited faithfully for 19 years for the return of her husband, Odysseus, from war so, as Ndebele points out, securing “her place in world literature as the ultimate symbol of a wife ‘so loyal and so true’”.

The absence of the man from the household because they are migrant workers, or exiles or detainees or have been jailed for long periods, he suggests, strikes a particularly relevant note in South Africa and so he presents the stories of four women whom he calls “Penelope’s descendants”.

All waited in one manner or another. Mammele Mafolo’s husband left a drought-stricken Lesotho to work on the mines and whose visits become increasingly irregular, and who finally abandons his wife and children and settles with another woman on the Reef. The second story features a woman whose husband went abroad to study. She supported him, but when he returned he found

Seeking answers to the complexity that is Winnie Mandela **Extraordinary weave of fact, speculation**

- 8 OCT 2003



PATRICK CULL reviews a new South African novel by University of Cape Town vice-chancellor Njabulo S Ndebele, **THE CRY OF WINNIE MANDELA** (David Phillip).

her pregnant by another man and divorced her.

The third woman is Patience Molete, whose husband is sent to Robben Island and who on his release becomes a high-ranking official in the ANC and marries a white woman. The description of her attempts to woo him back is extraordinary, and the tart political lesson contained in a letter from her former husband on the use of the word “coloured” is a telling essay on its own.

The final tale concerns a woman whose profligate and promiscuous husband becomes “so saturated with corruption that he began to plan around it”. When he died “he was what the township calls a ‘washout’,

totally bereft of dignity. A blubbing mass of pity”.

The four meet regularly for tea and scones and on one occasion they discuss Winnie and how she, too, waited, the critical difference being that while they did so in private, her “waiting” was public and celebrated “while we waited in the privacy of our homes, suffering in the silence of our bedrooms”. They propose a game in which each holds an imaginary conversation with Mandela that focuses on “something we deeply want to know about her thoughts and desires”.

And so the game begins. The first “descendant”, for example, asks Mandela about her much-publicised affair that saw a letter to her lover end up in the press, revealing in the process her own infidelity.

Just one example of the kind of controversy that will be generated by this book comes with the comment on Mandela’s life while her husband was in jail.

“Your husband trained himself to live without you and retained his transcendent dignity. Prison protected him and transformed him into a saint. He had no women flaunting themselves before him.

“You had countless suitors: men willing to risk life in the abyss between fame and perfidy. Their moral dilemma arose out of the thrill of secretly cuckolding a famous man while at the same time desiring fame for doing so. They took their chances, until you transformed the game of chance into an attribute of power.

“The risks for you at that point are enormous. To limit the risks, you had to amass enormous political power, sufficient to put you beyond criticism. Fear of you would substitute for moral judgement.”

The other three women also probe



Author Njabulo S Ndebele

various aspects of Mandela’s life. Finally there is the longest chapter in which Winnie Mandela engages her alter ego and accounts for her deeds and actions, revealing the terrifying ambiguous role of Major Theunis Swanepoel and examining controversially her appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

That chapter will no doubt infuriate many as Mandela proclaims:

“I was magnificent at the TRC hearings. I, the child of Major Theunis Swanepoel, queen of Brandfort and terror of Soweto, who mastered to perfection the art of technical denial, was intelligent, articulate, calm, easy, combative, reflective, arrogant and beautiful”.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela is an extraordinary, beautifully written book – it is hard to believe it is but 121 pages long, so many and complex are the issues raised.