

*Boxing and Other Stories* by Chris Dunton (Institute of Southern African Studies, National University of Lesotho)

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A volume of short stories is a nightmare for both publisher (impossible to market) and reviewer (impossible to wrap up in a single synopsis-cum-assessment). This makes it, with the possible exception of poetry, the least lucrative of genres, productive of unassertive volumes hidden somewhere between Spiritual and Self-help on the bookshop shelves.

This volume follows the trend, in being modestly produced by a press that seems not to be commercially oriented. The stories, too, are determinedly small-scale, concentrating on single, often static domestic situations. In one story, "Evidence of Love, Signs of a Marriage", the two main characters, a married woman and her brother-in-law/lover, remain in the same physical situation for the duration of the story: they don't move and they don't speak. The other characters, the woman's two children and her husband, are fast asleep throughout. The room is described in almost obsessive detail: apart from the usual basic amenities, there are, for reasons never explained, "five, maybe six car tyres". Not a fast-moving narrative; and yet entirely intriguing, in that we have to piece together a whole history of a marriage and an affair that is apparently about to end. Everything is understated or unstated; and yet the silences are eloquent, the inactivity charged with suppressed energy.

The other stories in the collection admittedly have more physical movement and dialogue than this one, but the technique remains much the same: a cross-section of an ordinary day in an ordinary life, filled with the inconsequentialities and inconsistencies of such a life; and yet adding up to something larger, a glimpse into hope and despair, the relentless discrepancy between aspiration and opportunity.

The stories are all set in West Africa, and the setting is almost tangibly rendered: quite unfastidiously but mercilessly Dunston reproduces the often malfunctioning, usually disorganised and always heat-stricken cities and towns. The picture that emerges of West Africa is not a particularly salubrious one, but that is hardly the point of the stories. If this is not I-had-a-farm-in-Africa stuff, nor is by any means an oh-what-a-crazy-continent kind of writing-down; the protagonists are almost without exception Africans who have no thought of comparing their situation with some metropolitan paradise. This is their world, and they're making a go of it.

When an English character appears, as in "Remarkable People", he is seen through the eyes of an African travelling companion, Obi, who finds his meticulousness and fussy patronising vaguely comical, sometimes irritating, by and large irrelevant: "Bernard of England, so bothered and self-conscious." Reflecting on Bernard's wife's leaving him, Obi speculates: "maybe if Bernard had ever once, just for a moment, let up, or just once admitted he didn't know, that something was beyond him, that he couldn't tell – or just once if he'd seen something he did not have to say *anything* about – maybe she'd have stuck around. Perhaps."

The volume, in other words, is not interested in giving us a tourist's-eye view of Africa; it tries to render what it is like to live in Africa. The first story, "Seeing Pedro, Being Pedro" introduces, as its title indicates, the volume's interest in the double perspective,

the difference between the character observed from the outside and the character's experience of his own life. Here Pedro is seen at first by a sceptical, somewhat impatient outsider, possibly a European, as a slightly ludicrous figure, flashy, ingratiating; but when we are taken into Pedro's squalid little world, he achieves real pathos: his determination to be a somebody comes to seem like a kind of crazy heroism in the face of insurmountable odds.

Given the constrictions most of the characters suffer from, Dunston taps a surprising variety of tones from his situations. There is often a wry kind of humour – gentle, as in “Kwame's Night”, a story of a schoolboy's crush on the girl playing opposite him in an ill-fated production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; or heartbreaking, as in “Pedro”, when the woefully inept wheeler-dealer is reduced to trying to cut a length of hose with his house key (how he arrives in that situation is a pleasure of the story that I shall not spoil by revealing).

A recurring theme in these stories is the sheer struggle to make it in an urbanised environment that has very little mercy on the small man or woman. Two stories, “A meteorite” and “Whenever I open my eyes”, feature young boys who, totally exploited by the informal structures they are obliged to work in, devise their own ways of surviving. The title story, “Boxing”, is something of a tour de force of multiple perspectives, with the primary narrative segueing into a secondary narrative that in turn segues into a further narrative – but all of them concerned with the problem of a powerless person trying to deal with the corrupt figures of authority on whom he is dependent.

The variety of character and setting here is remarkable. No less remarkable is the author's ability to cut into his characters' lives almost abruptly, spend a few pages with them, and leave us feeling that we know very much more about them than he has actually told us. The technique, as also the strangely elusive titles, is reminiscent of Raymond Carver, a comparison that, in the quality of the writing, is not excessive. *Boxing* is a superb little collection of finely crafted stories, a brave demonstration of the pleasures of a financially unrewarding genre.