

*Modern South African Stories* (Revised Selection) edited by Stephen Gray (Ad Donker).

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Stephen Gray's new collection of South Africa Stories builds on his two earlier such collections, *On the Edge of the World* (1974) and *Modern South African Stories* (1980). One may wonder about the need for a third edition; but one of the insights made possible by this rich and varied collection is how much South African literature has changed in the wake of democracy. Some of the older stories still reflect the political tensions of the old dispensation (Mphahlele's "A Ballad of Oyo," Essop's "Gerty's Brother," and in its oblique and chilling way, Wilhelm's classic "Lion"), but in general what we have here is a collection of stories facing up to a South Africa without the ready-made topic of apartheid.

Since these writers are all in a sense finding their bearings in relation to a changed society, there is a refreshing lack of predictability about their themes. It is, though, possible to risk, with some over-simplification, some generalisations about the collection as a whole.

In the first place, these stories, with single exceptions about which more later, are serious. One is tempted to find, following Ken Barris's "Clubfoot", ("written as a response to JM Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*"), what one might call a post-*Disgrace* syndrome, a certain bleak awareness of the end of euphoria. (Euphoria is here, too, in Elleke Boehmer's "27 April 1994".) I am not suggesting that this is a barren negativism: it is, rather, a thoughtful reassessment of the possibilities of fiction as much as of human endeavour. In this respect, Rose Moss's masterly "A Gem Squash" is exemplary, in its unsentimental assessment of an aging anti-apartheid activist, marooned in liberal-capitalist America as much by the obsolescence of his cause as by his failure to adapt to his country of exile: "The end of apartheid has stranded him here in America, where an encompassing ideology seems strange to the temper of people".

In a very different direction, Maureen Isaacson's "Blood Diamonds" also examines the new pressures of a changed society in her mordant story of a female traditional leader whose political victory makes her a slave to consumerism. More predictably, Farida Karodia's "A Handbag in the Boot" looks at the changed cityscape of Hillbrow, in which, however, the gap between rich and poor has not narrowed, merely become negotiated more aggressively.

The exceptions, that is, those stories using humour as their vehicle, are not for that reason light fare: on the contrary, they find their humour in the very grimness of their situations. Chris van Wyk's "Magic" deals with the most appalling circumstances in the life of "just an ordinary coloured South African family" in hilarious deadpan that becomes a kind of sublime stoicism: "Every Friday Uncle Arnie comes home drunk and beats her up. He still calls her a bitch and she calls him Arnie." So also "Heavy Cerebral Metal" by Deena Padayachee offers a dispassionate glimpse of violent male chauvinism: "Yes, women aren't like women any more. Just a teeny-weeny slap, that's all she got. But she carried on like I'd raped her or something."

As witness these two stories, male writers tend to cast women as victims more readily than female writers. The woman in "Clubfoot", an avatar of Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace*, is, for all her sullen independence, a consenting victim of male violence. "I am here, said her silence. Nothing can be done."

The storyteller in Phaswane Mpe's "Brooding Clouds" is accused of being a witch and necklaced, new political methods meeting age-old prejudice. Even in Dennis Venter's "Bearing Breasts", a tale about a woman who fights for her constitutional right to bare her breasts, the struggle is defined entirely against and in terms of male privilege, from "the old-boys network" to the lack of queues in men's toilets.

By contrast, the women writers by and large represent their women characters as empowered by their femininity. Nadine Gordimer's protagonist avails herself of the oldest revenge of womanhood under patriarchy: she cuckolds her husband and cherishes the knowledge that the child he loves as his own is not his. Rose Moss's Ruth, an expatriate South African anti-apartheid activist, is far more resilient and adaptable than her male counterpart, who cannot escape his own addiction to social injustice. Maureen Isaacson's Sibongile listens in bemused incomprehension to "a young woman from a commission for gender something" who offers to "explain the meaning of liberation to her." Rachelle Greeff's Maria dos Ramos, in the moving story "Tell Him It is Never Too Late", deals with dignity with the loss of her husband of fifty-seven years and with her own cancer: told that chemotherapy might prolong her life, "politely, thank you, she refused the offer." Sheila Robert's "A Kidnapping" deals with two female game rangers, G.I. Jane meeting Thelma and Louise.

In keeping with this non-doctrinaire approach, neither of the two stories with gay settings could be described as gay fiction in the old sense of dealing with homosexuality as a category of oppression and injustice: the characters happen to be gay, which makes for a certain difference in sexual dynamics, but there is no implication that they are in some sense disadvantaged by their sexual preference. Shaun de Waal's "Exposure", indeed, casts its protagonist, a gay author being photographed by a straight photographer, as willing accomplice in his own seduction: here the male gaze is not a sexual affront but a sexual overture. In Shaun Levine's "The Good Outside", the lover and the best friend of a recently deceased gay man negotiate the tricky overlap of their different intimacies with the dead man: a situation that could perhaps arise only in gay relations, but is in the first place an awkward social confrontation.

What conclusions can one draw from these observations? Perhaps only that South African literature has at last freed itself from the pressure of ideology, no longer feels the need to serve an anti-racist anti-sexist cause. This is an important liberation, of which Stephen Gray's collection is a highly readable and endlessly discussible chronicle.