

BOOK REVIEW :

TERROR AND PITY: ZIMBABWE 2009

John EPEL

Absent : The English Teacher

Harare : Weaver Press, 2009

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A sixtyish white English teacher is illegally dismissed from his post at a high school in Bulawayo. He accidentally reverses his (uninsured) old Ford Cortina into the headlight of a brand new Mercedes. The luxury vehicle belongs to one of the many concubines of a ZANU-PF cabinet minister (whose portfolio is that of ‘Child Welfare, Sweets and Biscuits’). They reach an out-of-court settlement: Ms Beauticious Nyamayakanuna (“Good meat” ...) gets Mr George’s house, furniture, books and household effects, including his grandmother’s silver teapot. From now on, he lives in the *kaia* in the back yard and becomes her kitchen boy. She speaks to him in Chilapalapa (a Zimbabwean pidgin). He has to wear a houseboy’s uniform: khaki shorts and shirt, tackies and a red fez with a tassel. He prepares delicious meals for his Madam in the kitchen; he himself gets a weekly ration of maize meal with which to make stiff porridge on a wood fire outside. When he has finished his housework, he gives the Madam’s children (free) lessons on *Macbeth* and *Othello*. Occasionally she “lends” him to her friends as a chauffeur. When the head of the prison needs to submit a literature assignment, he has George summarily arrested so that he can dictate the required essay to him. And so on.

If it were not all so close to reality, one would be tempted to dismiss it as farcical. Anything but. It is, quite literally, terrifying.

John Eppel is an award-winning poet (recipient of the Ingrid Jonker Prize) and a satirist of note; but where in his earlier novels it was the absurdities of (particularly) *Homo zimbabwensis* which attracted his mostly kindly mockery, in this new short book he tackles more penetrating themes, analysing from within, as it were, the paradoxical phenomenon of a white citizen in contemporary Zimbabwe. Though he ridicules the way the *nouveaux riches* ape their former Colonial masters, Eppel’s purpose here is far deeper. His field of reference covers the entire spectrum of English literature with Shakespeare’s great tragedies constantly recurring: the similarities between George and King Lear are not coincidental. But even the giant turnip which nobody can pull up achieves a wider relevance than the children’s tale from which it is taken.

Where satirists, in order to justify their specific points of view, tend to focus their attention almost exclusively on relatively superficial description of some particular society without any great analytical profundity, here however the reader encounters careful characterisation, surprising plot development, unlooked for depiction of unsullied humanity and a thoroughgoing realism that anchors the narrative firmly in the sphere of recognisable reality. That makes the inexorable ending genuinely tragic: fright is transformed into heart-rending pity. The circle reaches its fulfilment in catharsis.

There is so much more one would wish to say about this book – about the densely woven but never confusing interplay of themes, for instance, or the exceptionally accurate dialogue, the

alternation of writing styles – but limitations of space simply do not allow. Suffice it to say that only a master storyteller could have achieved all this within the space of 145 pages. I would recommend that everyone grasp the opportunity to be gripped by this book.

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