

## Book review

# Women Writing reflects diverse suffering of Zimbabweans at home and abroad

Review of *Women Writing Zimbabwe* (ed. Irene Staunton, 2008)

BY JOSEPHINE MUGANIWA

This book has 15 well-crafted short stories by women from various backgrounds. They capture the Zimbabwean experiences in a refreshing way. National challenges are reflected in comic fashion which enables the reader to celebrate life - rather than a sense of pathos. Broadly speaking, the stories can be divided into two categories: experiences at home and experiences in the Diaspora.

Women Writing Zimbabwe is an excellent collection, a must-read for everyone. It cannot be accused of not being fully Zimbabwean as John Eppel has complained that when most people talk of Zimbabwean authors, they mean black authors. All Zimbabweans are represented. In this way the collection does not hide the challenges and ironies of Zimbabwean experiences but opens them up for debate.

Nine of the stories focus on the experiences of Zimbabweans at home and how they cope with the challenges they face. Pat Brickhill's *Senzeni's*

*Nativity* focuses on teenage pregnancy. Esi moves from tragic feelings over wasted school fees to a celebration of new life. In the last paragraph everyone joins in the celebration despite the fact that the father never turns up and denies paternity. *Senzeni* herself gains a sense of identity and agency for the first time.

Di Charsley's *Death Wish* reflects the colonial history of dispossession of blacks by whites. This is juxtaposed with the current lack of food and loss of children to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The ironies of interracial relationships are fully highlighted in *Annie Holmes's Delivery*.

In *In the Heart of the Golden Triangle* Petina Gappah explores the meaning of success. Is it staying in a posh suburb, acquiring branded material wealth and associating with influential people in the community? Is it happiness? The persona hides behind materialism so as not to face the pain of being an abandoned wife.

Blessing Musariri's *Tichafataona Sleeps* reflects on the painful history of the

liberation struggle and its haunting aftermaths way after independence. In this it is similar to Alexander Kanengoni's *Echoing Silences* and Charles Samupindi's *Pawns*.

While old age is to be respected, there are many challenges faced by those who take care of the elderly. Chiedza Musengezi's *The Carer* fully explores this experience.

Vivienne Ndlovu's *Bare Bones* raises uncomfortable moral questions. It explores the concept of euthanasia in the context of a dilapidated health delivery system. A very touching story.

Mainini Grace's *Promise* by Valerie Tagwira portrays the challenges faced by the girl child in taking care of an ailing mother in the context of a failing economy.

Stories on the diaspora experience largely reflect a quest for identity and freedom. Freedom is mainly from economic impoverishment caused by the collapsed Zimbabwean economy.

In the style of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Menzis Gugu Ndlovu changes his name to Paul Khulu in

Gugu Ndlovu's *Everything is Nice, Zimbulele*. His adopted identity enables him to escape the weight of failure as he fails to fulfill his parents' expectations.

This is a valuable addition to contemporary Zimbabwean literature - reflecting the diversity of experiences, mostly painful, through which Zimbabweans are enduring in the first decade of the 21st Century.

Clockwise from top: Valerie Tagwira, Vivienne Ndlovu and Blessing Musariri.



## Taking the test

*"It's like waiting to find out if you will get eaten by lions"*

PHOTO: MUJAHID SAFODIEN/PLUSNEWS



**HARARE** - It is a typical hot February afternoon in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, but for Thulani Siziba, 33, it is an afternoon he will always remember. He is about to take his first HIV test.

As the executive producer at Radio Zimbabwe and host of a programme on HIV issues broadcast throughout

the country, it seems ironic that Siziba has taken so long to heed the advice he so often gives his listeners to "go and get tested". "I have just never made the time," he confessed.

Siziba is unmarried, has no children, and says he always uses condoms, but an element of doubt about his

HIV status is evident in his nervous laughter and efforts to avoid the gaze of every other person in the eerily quiet waiting room.

"It's like being thrown into a jungle and waiting to find out if you will get eaten by lions, or survive," he told IRIN/PlusNews as he waited to receive his test results.

"My mum already lost one son to AIDS; she can't afford to lose another."

Siziba's older brother died in 2001 after a long illness, and although he never tested for HIV, the family is convinced his death was AIDS-related.

"People tried to tell him he had an HIV-related illness, but he wouldn't believe it, even though he had lost a child to a similar illness," he said.

In the days before his brother died he kept asking to see Siziba, who had just moved from the family's hometown, Bulawayo, to the capital, Harare, to begin work at Radio Zimbabwe. Thinking it best to spare Siziba from seeing his brother emaciated and bed-ridden, his family never conveyed the request.

"I just wish I had had the information that I have now, back then," Siziba said. "I think my brother would still be alive today."

While waiting, he notices an HIV-awareness advertisement showing on the TV set in the corner of

the room and repeats the now ubiquitous message of the campaign: "It begins with you," and pauses to think.

Although he knows the message is true, getting as far as this waiting room has not been easy. His brother's death - followed by that of his brother's wife - convinced him that HIV is real, but did not persuade him to check on his own HIV status.

He continued to broadcast programmes about the importance of being tested, HIV-related stigma, how to live positively with the virus, and other HIV/AIDS-related matters without considering their significance to him.

It's not easy when the shoe is on the other foot. I can write all I want, but at the end of the day, I'm a human being who is scared of dying ..especially from AIDS.

At a recent workshop for Zimbabwean journalists by the Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Service (SAHAIDS), facilitator Aulora Stally suggested that the participants mobilise

resources for a national HIV testing day, and was met with a deafening silence.

"It's not easy when the shoe is on the other foot," commented one journalist who regularly writes articles urging others to be tested. "I can write and write all I want, but at the end of the day, I'm a human being who is scared of dying, and especially dying from AIDS."

Siziba's suggestion that a positive HIV test result would be like being "eaten by lions" is understandable in a country where an estimated 1.3 million people are living with the virus, and unmet needs for treatment and food claimed 2,700 lives a week in 2007 according to UNAIDS.

A counsellor comes into the waiting room and beckons; Siziba sighs heavily and follows her, but returns a few minutes later. "A big boulder has been lifted from my shoulders," he says, smiling broadly. "Discovering the truth is something so uplifting, and now I know where I stand."

- IRIN/PlusNews