

# **Writing Against Apartheid:**

## **Interviews with South African Authors**

### **by Dieter Welz**

*Reviewed by Cecily Lockett*

The ten interviews in this publication were conducted and collected by Professor Dieter Welz primarily for a German audience. Extracts from the various interviews were featured in a radio broadcast in 1984. Welz's project was to assess the 'sense of movement' within the South African literary world in relation to 'recent developments' in this country, and for this purpose he interviews a selection of 'leading black and white writers' including Elsa Joubert, Andre Brink, Richard Rive, Es'kia Mphahlele, Mathobi Mutloatse, Ingoapele Madingoane, Nadine Gordimer, Stephen Gray, Jeremy Cronin and Guy Butler. The topics raised include the dissolution of the PEN Centre in 1981 and the decision of the African Writers Association to function independently of the boycott resolution adopted by the African Literature Association of America, the concept of 'Black' writing, the position of the writer in a divided society and the Breytenbach affair. With such a promising brief it seems unfortunate that the interviews appear to be of marginal importance to

current literary-critical debate, partly because of the foreign perspective Welz brings to South African social and literary issues.

It is evident that Welz's conception of 'movement' within South African literature is seen to be the result of extraneous coercion - such as boycott resolutions - and internal pressures including government censorship and the rejection of white writers by their black counterparts, a rejection that led to the disbanding of PEN and the formation of the African Writers Association. Yet the most dynamic 'movements' in recent South African literary expression have been a direct response on the part of writers to socio-political immediacies, most manifest in the poetry, novels, short stories and drama of the 'Soweto generation' of the 1970s and early 1980s. Welz appears almost ignorant of this phenomenon. His interviews with Mothobi Mutloatse and Ingoapele Madingoane are brief and confined to general issues such as the character of black writing, the aims of black writers, and a brief history of Skotaville press. Where are the voices of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla, Gwala, Van Wyk, Dangor and a host of others who qualify more urgently for the title 'writers against apartheid' than do Stephen Gray or Guy Butler? What of the influence of black theatre and performance art (such as poetry-readings at trade union meetings)? Is 'writing against apartheid' only worthy of critical consideration when confined to the traditional Anglo-American modes of literary expression? Similarly, in the sphere of academic literary criticism - a topic touched on briefly in the interviews with Richard Rive, Stephen Gray and Guy Butler - Welz forgoes the opportunity to engage his subjects on matters of particular current interest such as the role of the writer and critic in the South African context and the claims of competing ideologies for dominance in academic discourse.

Writing Against Apartheid has little to interest those most centrally engaged in the problematic issues of South African literary studies. It may have limited value as an historical record, as the pace of developments since 1981 makes much of the material appear dated. One needs to question the reasons for NELM publishing interviews specifically for a foreign audience, especially as they offer very limited perceptions of the complexities of our socio-literary milieu. It is to be hoped that any further publications in this series will address the real interests of a South African readership.

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