

Managing the NOMA

Mary Jay

THE 1996 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa attracted an all-time record number of 176 titles entered, from 72 publishers, from 19 countries, and in 16 African languages. The winner was Kitia Toure for his novel in French *Destins Paralleles*, published by Nouvelles Editions Africaines of Cote d'Ivoire in 1995. This is the second time in the Award's sixteen-year history that the winning book has been published in Cote d'Ivoire, and the third that a novel in the French language has won. The Award - the only pan-African book (as opposed to solely literary prize) - is worth US\$10,000, and is sponsored by Kodansha Ltd, one of the world's biggest publishing houses with headquarters in Japan. The president of Kodansha, Mrs. Sawako Noma, carries on the tradition of her father who founded and endowed the Award, in supporting the Award with personal commitment and enthusiasm for the task of encouraging African writers and publishers, and bridging the gap between North and South.

The jury is chaired by Walter Bgoya from Tanzania, one of Africa's most distinguished and respected publishers, with wide knowledge of both African and international publishing. The other members are Adewale Maja-Pearce, Nigerian writer and critic, Kay Raseroka, University Librarian of the University of Botswana, a children's book expert, and head of the African Section of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA); Dr. Thandike Mkandawire, a noted social scientist and until recently head of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Senegal; and myself, Mary Jay. The jury cited the winning title as: 'a remarkably subtle and sophisticated novel, extremely original both in concept and construction. The vigour of the writing and use of language is executed with tremendous confidence. It is a book about Africa in a very profound sense; traditional values and approaches to the resolving of problems are explored; and the impact of the West is portrayed with more discernment than is usual.' The novel constructs the narrative development around three characters with the same name and identical life backgrounds, but with divergent fortunes (the 'parallel destinies' of the title). The three namesakes, Ki-Ca, are a ten-year-old orphan, an ambitious student, and an ambi-

tious, unscrupulous politician. The web of interactions between the dire conditions of the urban poor eking out an existence in the shanty towns, set against the blatant corruption and decadence of the ruling elite. The sharp socio-political satire is illuminated with subtle irony, and the sustained use of the monologue form enables the author to confront his social theme from a new, multiple perspective. It is an intellectual novel, but firmly based in reality; a political novel at the level at which society is at the hear of politics; and is sustained by an imaginative nerve and inventiveness.

Other titles, all published in 1995, which were honoured were *Women & Geometry in Southern Africa: Some Suggestions for Further Research* by Paulus Gerdes, published by the Universidade Pedagógica in Mozambique, which won Special Commendation; and four further titles which were awarded Honourable Mention: *The Law of Interpretation in Ghana (Exposition & Critique)* by S. Y. Bimpong-Buta, published by Advanced Legal Publications in Ghana; *Rope of Sand: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* by John Laband, published by Jonathan Ball Publishers in South Africa; *Ways of Dying*, a novel by Zakes Mda (previously better known as a playwright), published by Oxford University Press, Southern Africa; and *Presence of the Earth, New Poems* by Stephen Watson, and published by David Philip of South Africa.

The jury have been increasingly concerned about production standards of many entries over recent years. Standards are deteriorating, and whilst conscious of the difficult manufacturing conditions prevailing in many parts of Africa, nonetheless we take the view that standards in many cases were unacceptably low in 1996 and not accounted for by lack of facilities. This aspect will receive more critical attention from the jury in future. The other matter which concerned the jury in 1996 was the number of entries made by some publishers. Of course we are keen to attract entries, and to encourage African publishers - the prize being to honour African writers and publishers - to pit their best against each other. But the Award is for an outstanding new book published in the previous year, and in some cases publishers seemed to be sending in a large part of their list in the hope that something would hit the jackpot! This does not help the task of the jury, let alone the administrative costs. So

>>

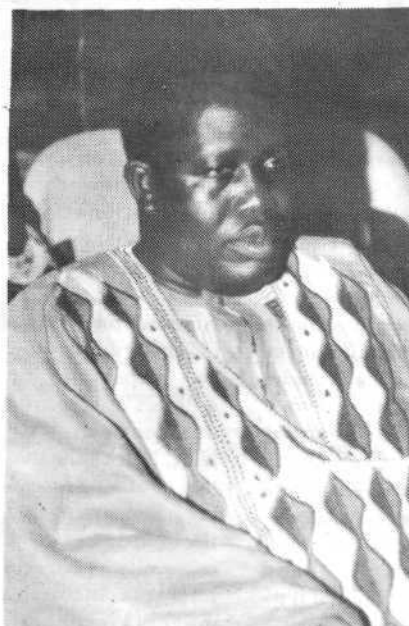
<< from 1997 entries from any one publisher are limited to three titles - which can come from any of the three eligible categories: scholarly or academic, literature, and children's titles.

The 1996 Award was presented to Kitia Toure in Accra, during the First Ghana International Book Fair - a fitting occasion, since the Award presentation ceremony is always associated with a book event in Africa, and it brought valuable exposure to an event worthy of support. I worked with the Ghana Trade Fair Authority (the organisers of the Book Fair) to plan the event. There were times when I suspected that they wondered what they had let themselves in for! My faxes flew constantly, and I was always assured that all would be well. Certainly, the event was very well attended - publishers, booksellers, librarians, political and civic dignitaries were our guests at the ceremony and a splendid dinner. Three senior executives represented the sponsors, and the President of Ghana had been billed to come although alas he was unable to do so at the last minute due to government commitments. The Chairman of the Council of State - the second most senior person in the government - presented the Award in his place, and was also able to acknowledge personally S. Y. Bimpong-Buta, the legal scholar who won an Honourable Mention, and who was present. The event was broadcast live on television in Ghana, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire, and there was certainly much evidence the next day in the market that Ghana had been watching, because traders were offering me 'special prices' because they had seen me on television!

The presentation ceremony is an occasion for reflection on the state of African publishing and books, and their context is the wider culture. Kitia Toure is the Artistic Director of the Centre National des Arts et de la Culture in Abidjan, and well known as an award-winning film-maker. He spoke movingly about the debt he owes to his humble father, and his family who succoured his talent. Interestingly, he exhorted other writers who use the French language in their literary works to 'set the same pace as their anglophone colleagues'. The Chairman of the Award, Walter Bgoya, addressed fundamental issues about the state of intellectual life in Africa today, and the contribution the Noma Award is making to contemporary African scholarship and literature. He placed Kitia Toure in the group of young intellectuals and creative writers he called 'the third generation' - those who did not live in the colonial experience, or were born in the last years of colonialism, and who do not carry the nostalgia of the great movement for colonial freedom. They do not claim special places in the sun and can look at their Africa without personal and national failure being blamed on colonialism alone. Research amongst this group is producing new insights and interpretations, greatly enriching African history, and battling with issues in literature such as the language question and the object of literature itself. Whilst recognising some weaknesses, he applauded 'the third generation' as being capable of delivering Africa to itself because they rely on their own creativity. Using the situation in the Great Lakes region as an example, he launched an appeal of Africa scholars, writers and artists to provide leadership in re-thinking Africa in the next millennium.

Such a full year of work leading up to the jury meeting, and then the presentation ceremony, would leave one with a sense of flatness, were it not for the fact that planning the mailing to publishers for the 1997 Award started even before the 1996 ceremony had taken place! And now that we are into 1997, entries are already coming in and the challenge and interest of seeing where it will lead us by the end of the year starts again. Interesting new publishing ventures, emerging trends in writing or scholarship, challenging new writers... we start the task again of seeking the book published in Africa by an African writer in the previous year which will set a benchmark for the future. The task for writers and publishers is to be in the forefront, meeting the challenges set out by the Chairman.

Mary Jay is Secretary to the Noma Awards Managing Committee as well as coordinator of ABC administration in Oxford.



21.1

21.1
Kitia Toure

writers and artists to provide leadership in re-thinking Africa in the next millennium.

Such a full year of work leading up to the jury meeting, and then the presentation ceremony, would leave one with a sense of flatness, were it not for the fact that planning the mailing to publishers for the 1997 Award started even before the 1996 ceremony had taken place! And now that we are into 1997, entries are already coming in and the challenge and interest of seeing where it will lead us by the end of the year starts again. Interesting new publishing ventures, emerging trends in writing or scholarship, challenging new writers... we start the task again of seeking the book published in Africa by an African writer in the previous year which will set a benchmark for the future. The task for writers and publishers is to be in the forefront, meeting the challenges set out by the Chairman.

Mary Jay is Secretary to the Noma Awards Managing Committee as well as coordinator of ABC administration in Oxford.