

# Black Fury

James Gibbs

Kodwo Abaidoo, *BLACK FURY*, Woeli Publications, Accra, 1995, 301 pp.

**T**HIS is a book whose time has passed. A political thriller set in 2027, it concerns the strategy by which Black nationalists from white-ruled Malagada in Southern Africa, those in sympathy with them and those hired by them, bring pressure to bear on the white regime and its allies to accept black majority rule. For his work, Kodwo Abaidoo has redrawn the African continent a little, but the rest of the globe - the setting for most of the action in the novel, is intact: Europe and North America are in the right places geographically. The values of the book are fundamentally those of the thriller genre, with its lack of interest in humanity and its preoccupation with sadistic sex. There are major flaws in the writing and there is a confusing superabundance of plot.

One can't help but feel that, as a novelist, Abaidoo must have viewed the political changes of the last seven years with some chagrin. He must have realised that the obliteration of the Berlin Wall, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the release of Mandela, and the holding of elections in South Africa, meant that any credibility or indeed any interest in this novel was leaking away. The manuscript became an historical curiosity in 1989. So far from being prophetic - or an intriguing glimpse of a possible future - *Black Fury*

is a novel that was long passed its sell by date before it was published. This is a pity since considerable labour went into the writing and publication of the book, but not a great cause for regret since *Black Fury* is not, in any case, a very good piece of writing. It is not the sort of work that would, I would have thought, have commended itself to an African publisher. Although an African political issue is central, Africa is not presented with particular insight, and Africans are shadowy presences. The one part of the world Abaidoo writes about without detail is focus of concern: Southern Africa! (Awareness of ignorance perhaps accounts for the redrawing of the map).

Despite the African political dimension to the book, it is essentially a 'Western' thriller. At one point - after passwords have been exchanged, one of the characters says: 'Why all this James Bond-ism?' (184) Abaidoo thus provides a hostage to fortune: the sort of reference reviewers will jump on. The novel is, indeed, derivative. As if to draw attention to other forebears, it contains a character called Simenon, and another called Templar. The literary context of this book is provided by European and American traditions; Fleming, Frederick Forsyth, Jean Le Carre and their ilk stalk the text. They account for some of its strengths, and for some of its weaknesses.

On the positive side, Abaidoo is generally excellent

on places. He knows the importance of detail and precision in setting the scene. He is good on road names, public buildings, tube stations and the like. He has, I suspect, travelled widely, he knows the places in the Northern Hemisphere that he describes; he has collected streets maps and used them. He is good on the nitty-gritty - but he is not, even at this level, perfect. For example, cars are parked with infuriating ease in crowded city centres and it takes an hour by fast train from Paddington to Reading!

On the negative side the writing is, like much of that in the thriller genre, limited when it concerns human feelings. There are several assassinations and quite a number of betrayals in the novel, but these rarely cause the pulses of those involved to race, certainly there is no soul searching. See, for example, the relaxed manner in which Carlo drives away from the scene after shooting his 'target' in Maryland (151). He has 'taken out' an important American and might assume that a police operation had been set in motion, yet he is not even worried about disposing of the gun that lies beside him.

Abaidoo's killers, of which there are several, have little emotional life, but they do have sex lives. Following the thriller genre, the writing about sexual arousal and sexual liaisons tends to repeat a formula. There is a sub-Ian Fleming quality about the hand-me-down eroticism. (See 127, 133, 136, 269).

An element in Fleming's erotic writing is also followed in several scenes of sadistic sex. In these Abaidoo actually out-Flemings Fleming. An extreme example is the account of Roland Cutler's fren-

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<< zied sexual attack that has been caught on video and that is used to blackmail him (162-3). But there is also the encounter between Mfonda and Woods referred to below. It is disconcerting that Abaidoo passes with some decorum ('Then all hell broke lose', 'The rest was a blur' etc.) over mutually enjoyable sex but goes into considerable detail in those scenes which combine sex with violence. Without being prudish, there is a disturbing sense that Abaidoo is writing to meet certain expectations: readers, it is assumed, want a certain number of sex scenes, and they relish sadism.

As might be expected from what I have said, characterization is weak. This is noticeable in the handling of motivation, particularly where characters shift their allegiance. For example, at one point 30 year old Mablane Mbusa, the African mistress of a racist general, Frisch, is recruited to kill her lover. There is reference to the plan to enlist here, but silence about how the approach is made or how she reacts to overtures. On the other hand, and, in view of the emphasis on violence already mentioned, not surprisingly there is a lengthy description of the manner in which she disposes of the general - and a clumsily staining for immediacy as she does it. Briefly, she injects potassium cyanide into a cake 'now' and he eats it 'now' (68).

The writing is, in fact, released by violence and death - and in this once again it follows the convention of the thriller. In addition to the last minutes of General Frisch (70), there are particularly elaborate accounts of deaths, in Germany (6), and in Paris (173). When people die on a massive scale

in Philadelphia following the detonation of a canister of poison gas, Abaidoo waxes lyrical. He also becomes confused, and the account includes the following:

*The vehicular commotion in the area boggled the imagination. ... Crushed vehicles littered the streets.*

*... A stunning blonde lay astride the pavement, her legs over her poodle.' 228-231.*

(Incidentally the African liberation group responsible for this wholesale slaughter does not take account of the significant number of African-Americans likely to be killed by an attack on down-town Philadelphia).

When Hamburg later receives similar treatment, the novelist writes:

*... No one moved in the tram now. No one could. They had been gripped by the cold death that was sweeping across the Plaza. (238)*

Since the novel's contribution to the international thriller genre is in putting the triumph of an African democratic movement at the centre, it might be anticipated that African characters would have major roles to play and that they would provide a sympathetic presence at the centre of the novel. This does not happen and, indeed, several of the African characters are particularly poorly drawn - they don't attract much of the novelist's attention. They may be planners and paymasters, but they

inhabit the margins of the plot and are not brought to life on the page. I suspect this is because Abaidoo has more models for second-hand Cosa Nostra hit-men and corrupt CIA agents than for African freedom fighters and nationalist campaigners.

The process of generating interest in a story-line, taking it to a sort of conclusion, and then dropping it is repeated several times in *Black Fury* - and is a particularly irritating feature of the work. The novel contains enough plots for four thrillers and enough characters for five or six. Abaidoo would have been well advised to economise, to concentrate, to follow sequences through to conclusions. For example, one asks in vain what happens when Kalule is under surveillance? And one wonders: what does Stevenson Crump of *The Washington Post* do with the information he collects in Africa? The first question draws attention to poor plotting, and the second question points to a larger silence: What about public opinion and the media? Abaidoo writes of a world in which journalists have little impact. He writes of politicians who seem to act without taking heed of what the media is saying.

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## Producing Africa

Fiona Ledger

**I**N 1967 when the BBC World Service broadcast *The Union Men*, a play by John Storm-Roberts, an Englishman who lived in Nairobi, a tradition was born on the BBC: radio drama for Africa.

The theme of this first play is a mystery - the tape onto which it was recorded is now blank - but it was to be followed by four or five plays for Africa, all written by Europeans (including, oddly, the Swiss playwright, Friedrich Dürrenmatt),

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