

BOOK REVIEWS

Bones By C. Hove. Harare, Baobab, 1988, viii, 135 pp., ISBN 0-908311-03-6, Z\$9,90.

Chenjerai Hove, a leading Zimbabwean poet, recently won the Noma Award for his trail-blazing novel, *Bones*. The novel — one is tempted to call it a dramatic poem — is a sensitive evocation of the horrors of war. The haunting, elegiac style evokes the thoughts, feelings and frustrations of the protagonist, Marita, who is a conscientious, over-worked, long-suffering farm labourer. By choosing an 'ordinary woman' as his central figure, Hove exposes the impact of the war on those who, in many respects, bore the brunt of the suffering. Invaluable to her employer, yet systematically belittled by him, Marita grows in moral stature throughout the novel as her determination, courage and fortitude are revealed.

The humiliation that the workers endure from their boss, nicknamed Manyepo because of his belief that all Africans are liars, is set in a context of extreme poverty and degradation; as Marita's husband points out: 'I am not going back to that reserve where dogs and people eat from one plate' (p. 18). Ironically, Marita lies in order to save Manyepo from the guerrillas who wish to kill him as a warning to other cruel employers. In the midst of carnage and suffering she does not lose sight of the value of human life.

Hove's ability to enter into Marita's consciousness is breathtaking, his use of Shona idioms and speech patterns lends authenticity to the narrative, and the rich texture of the novel is apparent in the sophisticated use of imagery and symbol.

The plight of the childless or barren woman is brought sharply into focus in Marita's recollection of the early years of her marriage. The thoughtless assumption that it is the woman who is responsible in cases of infertility and the snide remarks of neighbours highlight the plight of women within a Zimbabwean context. The rape of Janifa by the predatory Chisaga is symbolic of the systematic abuse of power by those in authority — be they White or Black. The pathos lies in the fact that power is so often misused for intensely selfish and decadent ends.

The novel explores different responses to the abuse of power — from Marita's husband's cowed acceptance of the status quo to the cowardly bully-boy tactics of the craven Chisaga, who ingratiates himself with Manyepo and oppresses those slightly lower down the pecking order. Marita is a symbol of those with the courage to challenge the system, who refuse to accept the status quo. Her love for and her concern over the official's refusal to tell her the fate of her only son, who joined the guerrillas, precipitates her quest for him in the alien and alienating environment of the city. Significantly, she dies during her quest. The reader builds up a kaleidoscopic picture of Marita from the recollections of those closest to her. Her determination to take on bureaucrats, her resolve to ask the questions others refuse to ask and her insistence on public accountability all mirror her heroic stature. Like all tragic heroes, she goes down fighting, and the text suggests that her spirit lives on in the minds of all who knew her, as a vindication of her moral stature.

Hove's poetic insight into the conditions of those who suffer is mediated with deep humour and compassion. The resilience of the human spirit is apparent throughout the narrative and the novel is a classic in its own right. Though deeply

embedded in the Zimbabwean experience, the novel has a universal significance — as testified by its winning the prestigious Noma Award. Chenjerai Hove is to be congratulated for producing such a powerful novel, his first written in English, and the reading public, undoubtedly, eagerly awaits his next book.

Baobab Books are also to be congratulated on the excellent quality of the book. Luke Tongoronga's illustrations are very striking and the cover is very attractive indeed.

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Nervous Conditions By *Tsitsi Dangarembga*. Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988, 204 pp., ISBN 0-949225-79-7, Z\$13,20.

First things first: this is a very well-written and absorbing novel. The writer's lucid prose style immediately involves the reader in the unfolding drama of the young Shona heroine growing up as she struggles to understand and to adapt to two very different cultures and life-styles. As the young Tambudzai grows up she has to come to terms with both the traditional African culture, as typified by her parents' homestead in the rural areas of the then Rhodesia, and the modern, Western way of life as typified by the mission run by her wealthy, comparatively sophisticated uncle where she is educated. The narrator, blending the shrewd innocence of the child she was and the reflective, slightly cynical woman she is now, sees both systems for what they are: unlike many African writers, Tsitsi Dangarembga does not view the rural homestead in nostalgic, sentimental terms; indeed there are several passages in the novel describing the poverty, squalor, and hopelessness of Tambudzai's parents' home with horrifying realism.

But all is not sweetness and light on the other side either. The Western way of life is portrayed as attractive, but dangerous. The strains of living in a foreign culture warp Tambudzai's uncle's essentially benevolent nature and mar his relationship with his daughter, Nyasha (whose mentality is more English than Shona as a result of spending most of her early childhood in England). Tambudzai's downtrodden mother sums up this predicament most succinctly: 'It's the Englishness, it'll kill them all if they aren't careful' (p. 202). It is partly this strain of adapting to two conflicting cultures that gives rise to the 'nervous conditions' of the title.

This novel is also about another kind of conflict, that between the sexes. It is, in the narrator's own words, 'my story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men' (p. 204). At first, Tambudzai sees women's subordinate position as part of their poverty, but comes to realize that

the victimization... was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them... But what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (pp. 115-16).

Each of the four women reacts differently to this attempted subjugation, and their actions and attitudes make up a great deal of the interest of this book.

All these points, though themselves very much worth writing about, would