

Narrating the Zimbabwean Nation: a conversation with John Eppel

By Drew Shaw

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In this interview, John Eppel, a veteran of Zimbabwean writing, confirms his reputation as an “angry jester”, determined to expose what he describes as “humbug”, wherever he sees it. With his satires, Eppel has stirred the national literature with subversive laughter, ridiculing both Rhodesian society under Ian Smith and post-independence society under Robert Mugabe. With his poetry he innovatively marries European forms with southern African content. During the crisis of the 2000s he refused exile and has been consistently critical of political and social corruption and injustice from within Zimbabwe’s borders.

Explored here are Eppel’s relationship to the Zimbabwean nation, multiculturalism versus Mugabeism, the political crisis of the past decade, the plight of the poor, and the challenges facing a white writer in Zimbabwe. Eppel’s use of satire and sonnets, his literary mentors, the actual process of writing, and his novel *Absent: the English Teacher* are addressed in further detail. Also discussed are his views on the role of NGOs, expatriates and academics, his opinions on poetry, and his belief that craft, more than content, ought to be the measure of quality in postcolonial writing.

John Eppel, born in 1947, is one of the most prolific of Zimbabwean authors; and he has been writing poetry and prose since the 1960s. He lives in Bulawayo where he is an English teacher at the Christian Brothers College. His poetry collection *Spoils of War* won the Ingrid Jonker Prize in 1989 and his novel *DGG Berry’s The Great North Road* won the M-Net Prize in 1992. His second novel *Hatchings* (1993) was selected by Anthony Chennells, for the *Times Literary Supplement* (2001), as the most significant book to have come out of Africa. Another novel *The Giraffe Man* followed in 1994, then *Sonata for Matabeleland* in 1995 and *Selected Poems 1965-1995* in 2001. Then came two

more novels, *The Curse of the Ripe Tomato* (2001) and *The Holy Innocents* (2002). These were followed by *The Caruso of Colleen Bawn and Other Short Writings* (2004), *Songs My Country Taught Me* (2005) and *White Man Crawling* (2007), a miscellany of prose and poetry. His latest novel is a tragi-comic satire titled *Absent: the English Teacher* (2009). Most recently, he has published a collection of short stories and poems with Julius Chingono, titled *Together* (2011).

Steeped in English literary tradition yet also in touch with everyday Zimbabwean realities, John Eppel writes from a post-colonial, cross-cultural nexus often at the heart of regional concerns. Common critiques of other white Zimbabwean writers (of imposing “whiteness” as normative, of appropriating African realities and landscapes) fail to account for Eppel, one begins to appreciate, because he writes self-critically and takes another approach. That said, it is impossible, one quickly discovers, to deter Eppel from speaking his mind, from courting controversy. There were several disagreements during the course of this interview but it was an illuminating discussion, which I hope sheds light on Eppel’s significance to literary and cultural issues of the region. The following conversation is the result of a telephone call and several email exchanges in 2010, all done before the publication of *Together*, his recent collaboration with fellow author and friend, Julius Chingono.

DS: Thanks for taking the time to do this interview. I’ll start by quoting other commentary about your work. Khombe Mangwanda (2006: vi) has said your “work exudes a deep love for [your] country” and he applauds your refreshing “representation of Zimbabwe as a space wherein the various cultures of the nation interact with one another ... undermining difference.” Anthony Chennells (2004) has heralded your close identification with the Matabeleland landscape, yet your ability also to distance yourself “satirically from white claims to an uncomplicated Zimbabwean identity” and your willingness to confront “the official corruption and misgovernance that has marked the last twenty years.” Veteran journalist Grace Mutandwa also commends your focus on “today’s Zimbabwe where those in power abuse it and those without struggle to make things right” (Eppel 2004). Kizito Muchemwa says you have “the sharp observation of a naturalist,” and “Not many Zimbabwean poets are able to

evoke in a poem the particularity of the physical environment like he does” (Eppel 2004). Dan Wylie declares you are “a craftsman of high order, a poet and a novelist who savages complacency with deft ironies” (Eppel 2004). And you’ve had more favourable reviews of your most recent novel. Also your poem “Jasmine” featured in the Guardian newspaper in UK as “Poem of the Week”, where its cross-culturalism was highlighted (Rumens 2010). These are all great accolades. Nevertheless, you have yet to win a literary prize in your homeland Zimbabwe, and I think you’re not as well-known as one might expect in discussions of southern African literature. Also struggled, I believe, in the early days to find a publisher in Zimbabwe. On the other hand recognition, in the form of literary prizes, has come from neighbouring South Africa. Am I correct in surmising it’s been a struggle for you to achieve acclaim - more so in Zimbabwe than in South Africa?

JE: It *has* been a long, hard struggle to achieve, not acclaim, but some recognition in Zimbabwe ... As for South Africa, that’s an interesting story. Nearly all my recognition came before Independence. My first three novels and my first two poetry anthologies were all published, by small presses, in Apartheid South Africa. Since then, political correctness (I think) has more or less counted me out. As you know, I satirise humbug whatever the colour or creed ... But I don’t write satire only. I regard myself primarily as a poet, and most of my poems are not primarily satirical.

DS: Probably your poetry, on the whole, has a more serious tone to it than your prose ...
Some years ago, you won the Ingrid Jonker Prize for it. For you, what is poetry?

JE: I think poetry for me should be committed and beautiful. Definitions by Theodor Adorno and Anne Stevenson speak on my behalf. First Adorno: “A work of art [a poem] that is committed, strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political.” ... Now Stevenson: “Great poetry – happens when sound, rhythm and image bring about a mysterious feeling of wholeness that somehow draws mind, body and spirit together into what both Yeats and Eliot envisioned as a unified dance.” ... A poem is a box (the form) full of memorabilia (the content). My box is European, my memorabilia are African. This isn’t a new idea; George Herbert defined a poem as “A box where sweets compacted lie.”

DS: What are the challenges for you in crafting a poem about landscape, nature and the elements?

JE: There were no real challenges beyond the creative process until I got the message from academics that settlers wrote about the land, or painted it, or photographed it in order to appropriate it, a kind of artistic version of commercial farming. They were right, of course, and from then on my poems about nature became more challenging, more ironical.

DS: There is now a large output of “white-writing” from southern Africa, and I wonder if you could comment on it – how you situate yourself within it. I’m thinking of Peter Godwin, Alexandra Fuller and others. Can you state some of the ways you are similar to and different from other contemporary white Zimbabwean writers?

JE: For one thing, I still live in Zimbabwe. For another, I do not use the genre of memoir so favoured by the new wave of white writers ... Thirdly, I see my primary readership as African; they seem to see theirs as Western. Those are the differences. The similarities, of which I am not proud: nostalgia, self-pity ...

DS: In your poetry, your speaker often tries to identify with the unemployed and dispossessed versus those abusing power. Would you say this is an important concern for you? For example:

Sonnet with One Unstated Line

See the shambling gait of the unemployed,
the vacant stare of the dispossessed;
the plastic bags by breezes buoyed
or, when evening settles, at rest.
Hear the cry of hornbills lost in yards
of rubble and rags, to split the ears
of those who stand and watch; and the guards
unguarded, hammering, hammering.
Smell the blood and mucous, ashes damp;

breath of birds turned children clamouring,
children clamouring. A tyrant's stamp:
a boot, a fist, a fourteen pounder:
come and witness our city flounder.
(Eppel 2007: 14)

Could we say your sympathies lie in some sense with “the proletariat”?

JE: A very important concern. My sympathies do lie with the proletariat, but there is this irony, which complicates things. When the poor get given the same advantages as the middle class, they very quickly begin to behave like the middle class. This is a theme in *Absent: The English Teacher*. So what do you do? Romanticise poverty? Ugh!

DS: Are you trying to highlight something fundamentally wrong with the whole system, then?

... Could we say this comes from a materialist/Marxist class-based perspective?

JE: I'm not sure what perspective but I disagree with Jesus that the poor will always be with us.

Poverty, unlike religion or vulgar capitalism, is a virus that will be eradicated, as it almost has been in a few countries. What angers me is that it is taking so long. And it is because of the shocking greed of people in power, corporate as well as political.

DS: I notice that national concerns are often at the core of your poetry, which is politically challenging in many respects. But is it hard to balance the personal voice in your poetry with a political voice? Do you think poetry loses something when it becomes too focussed on politics, when there is too strong an emphasis on conveying a political message? ... In fact, do you think you could be accused of being a little ‘too political’ at times, to the detriment of your poetry?

JE: I don't live in Finland or New Zealand; I live in strife-torn Zimbabwe. I am surrounded by unnecessary suffering; unnecessary because Zimbabwe's mineral wealth alone, if fairly distributed, would be sufficient to transform us into a sub-tropical Finland or a landlocked New Zealand. The cruelty and greed of those who were in power and those who are in power makes me very angry, compels me to be political (in the narrow sense of the word). However, if you took an inventory of

my poems, and I regard myself primarily as a poet, you might be surprised to find a number that are not even implicitly political.

DS: You seem particularly at home with the sonnet form. What is it about tried and tested forms that you find appealing to combine with local themes and a Zimbabwean context?

JE: After all, I am an African European! My primary school teachers in the 50s were all British expatriates. My own roots stretch as far east as Lithuania. My head was stuffed with images of Peter Pan and Wendy while my feet withstood the paper thorns of the African bush. The sonnet, as you know, originated in Italy and was made famous by Petrarch in the 14th century. Its theme was unrequited love. When, in the 16th century, it was imported by other European countries, it was adapted to other themes like religion (John Donne), politics (John Milton), and nature (William Wordsworth). One of my favourite poets is John Keats, and he wrote marvellous sonnets like “To Sleep” and “Bright Star”. I learned to write sonnets by reading these great practitioners of the form, none greater than Shakespeare ... To use an analogy from the visual arts, the sonnet form is the frame of my canvas upon which I paint words. I am very much at home with the Iambic pentameter line. It holds in suspension shorter lines, which may tumble into verse, and longer lines, which may drag into prose. As for rhyme, what did Proust say ... something about a further refinement of thought “... as great poets do when the tyranny of rhyme forces them into the discovery of their finest lines.”

DS: You are increasingly recognised for what you bring to the conversation about form and craft in Zimbabwean literature. What is literary craftsmanship in your view? And how important is it to the art and the act of writing?

JE: Here I can speak only for myself. Paradoxically, constraints like those imposed by a sonnet – a certain metre, a certain rhyme scheme, a certain number of lines ... release me into creativity. Craftsmanship for me is nearly everything. Without it you have prose that looks like a poem. My poems never begin with ideas; they begin with images or a cluster of words that assert themselves rhythmically. A good poet is like a cabinet maker: he doesn’t use nails to secure joints, he uses tenon and mortise. It’s prosody, I believe, which makes a poem beautiful regardless of its content. But I take it further than that. As I have said somewhere else, there is an ironic element to my craft; I use it

as a tool of self-mockery, a tool to accuse the culture that produced it. Many of my poems verge on parody.

DS: Could you talk about the process of writing for you? Is it relaxed or disciplined? Would you say you are a rapid or a slow writer? Do you write a little every day or do you have intermittent 'bursts'? How long does it usually take you to write a poem, a short story or a novel?

JE: My writing is controlled by the fact that I have to work to earn a living; and school teaching is quite exhausting. Consequently I rely on school holidays to do my writing - in between preparing new 'O' and 'A' Level set works. In any given year, apart from language, I teach a minimum of 14 texts. This year, for example, I have taught "The Tempest", "Twelfth Night", "Richard the Third", "A view From the Bridge", "Death and the King's Horseman", "Nervous Conditions", "The Nun's Priest's Tale", "Journey's End", "All My Sons", "The Homecoming", "Songs of Ourselves", "Selected Poems of Wordsworth", "The Great Gatsby", "Romeo and Juliet", and others in the lower forms. This is one reason why I write novellas rather than full blown novels, and why I write them quickly. "Absent: The English Teacher" for example, took less than three months to write.

My writing is relaxed AND disciplined, not in any paradoxical way. It is relaxed now because I have disciplined it over more than forty years of practice. It entails very little conscious editing; most of that happens in my sleep. I rely strongly on my sub-conscious. Most important, most of my writing grows out of loss, personal or social or universal. Without a sense of loss I have very little inclination to write anything. As for my poems: some take minutes to write, others, years.

DS: Do you keep abreast with other Zimbabwean writing and can you comment on what you have in common with other Zimbabwean writers?

JE: I do keep abreast with other Zimbabwean writing, and it fills me with joy to read poems and stories by the so-called born frees who have broken away from the shackles of Mugabeism (for want of an uglier word), and are asserting themselves as satirists and sun-drenched lyricists. A young poet who has impressed me very much is Togara Muzanenhamo because his form equals his content. He is a craftsman... Right now I am teaching Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* to my A-level students, and in the recent past I have taught Mungoshi's *Some Kinds of Wounds*, and poetry by Zimunya and

Hove, among others. I admire these older writers, Mungoshi in particular. I have been sometimes compared to Marechera (the writer, Thabisani Ndlovu (2009), calls us “angry jesters”) but I hope that’s where the similarity ends. I find much of Marechera’s poetic diction quaint, and I am made a little uncomfortable by his narcissism. I did, however, thoroughly enjoy *The House of Hunger*. As for Yvonne Vera, I’m sorry to say I don’t agree with the academic hype about her. I find her turgid, barely readable. But I am proud of the recent achievements of Brian Chikwava and Petina Gappah. I think I have a lot in common with other Zimbabwean writers with regard to treatment of issues like corruption, abuse of power, and poverty; but in terms of form and style, I think I am quite different, especially in my poetry. Although I write some free verse, most of my poetry is steeped in prosody. I do this both as a form of self-mockery and a challenge to my craft.

DS: You obviously disagree with many about Yvonne Vera. Although you both hail from Bulawayo, of course you are very different writers. You write with satire and irony while her writing has an earnest, somewhat sombre tone to it. And evidence of classic literary craft seems to be your measure for good writing, which you’ve said you don’t perceive in her work. It’s a controversial point because of course many appreciate what they see as Vera’s attempt to pioneer new forms and to break with masculinist, Western traditions in literature - even though she may not necessarily excel in what you consider carefully-crafted literature. Also, I beg to differ with you about Marechera. I think perhaps the two of you have more in common than you concede - both being “angry jesters” as Thabs Ndlovu (2009) points out, both having an ambivalent (can we say love/hate?) relationship to the Zimbabwean nation, both using grotesque realism to depict an abnormal society. I know Marechera is often criticised for his narcissism but isn’t there’s something refreshing about the level of honesty that goes with it? Aren’t those intense self-reflections, those uncensored explorations of personal identity more broadly relevant if you think about it? ...

JE: Your points about Marechera are entirely relevant. I think it’s a matter of personal taste ... The contrast you make between me and Yvonne Vera, that I write “with satire and irony” while she has a “somewhat serious tone”, overlooks the fact that there is nothing more serious in literature than satire.

T.S. Eliot described Alexander Pope as a poet of hatred. I hope there is no hatred in my satires, but there is plenty of rage.

DS: The question of who belongs to the Zimbabwean nation has been extremely politicised in the last decade or more. Do you ever feel disqualified or are you made to feel disqualified from writing and representing the Zimbabwean nation because of your ethnic origins (that is the fact that you are white, not black)?

JE: Until very recently, yes. But two renowned black academic Zimbabweans have positively reviewed my most recent published novel, *Absent: The English Teacher*. I am referring to Kizito Muchemwa and Robert Muponde ... To get back to your question about belonging, the last decade has been tough for the relatively few remaining white Zimbabweans who haven't climbed into bed with ZANU PF ministers. The racial hatred issued forth by government mouthpieces like the daily newspapers, *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, has amounted to verbal genocide.

DS: Though this is not widely recognised, I think you are one of the most patriotic of Zimbabwean writers - as Khombe Mangwanda also notes in his introduction to your novel *Hatchings*. Would you agree? ... By this I mean you've chosen to stay and write in Zimbabwe despite the hardships – and you refuse to censor yourself, which takes considerable courage. Also, your focus is strikingly local and particular to Zimbabwe, especially Matabeleland – down to the birdlife, wildlife, the bush, the droughts, the flora and fauna, and the sights, smells and sounds of your hometown Bulawayo. On the one hand I think you try to catch a certain beauty that is the Zimbabwean nation; on the other hand... all along, you also draw attention to its flaws and fault lines, to the catastrophe of corruption on a national scale, to ongoing struggles for social justice.

JE: In this country patriotism has come to mean love of government, so it's a word I steer clear of. But I do love my country; I love Matabeleland; I love my ramshackle house in Bulawayo where my three children grew up; I love my job at Christian Brothers College where I am steeped in a multicultural microcosm.

DS: This love is evident in your writing but there are also those who have accused you of being a bit overzealous in your support for Matabeleland? Memory Chirere (2010), from the University of Zimbabwe, for example, has said in your writing you are “decidedly anti-Shona ... Everywhere Eppel’s Shonas are senselessly clobbering and haranguing either a white man or a hapless Ndebele.” What’s your response?

JE: Of course I am not anti-Shona; I am anti people in power who abuse it, and at this time in our history, most of those happen to be Shona. In colonial times it was Europeans, in the 1870s it was Ndebeles. In the future it may be the Chinese.

DS: Readers are invited to laugh at anecdotes that are frequently hilarious. And yet I also sense a deep sadness underlies the humour (I find this especially true in your later work, especially *Absent: the English Teacher*). Although you show great affection for your country, I sense this is tinged with doubt that this will ever be reciprocated. Am I right?

JE: Like many clowns, I am a melancholic at heart. Maybe that’s why I became a poet instead of a chartered accountant. As another poet/satirist, Byron, said: “And if I laugh at any mortal thing, ‘tis that I may not weep”. I suspect that this would have been the same had I grown up anywhere else in the world. If my love for Zimbabwe is ever officially reciprocated it will be long after I am safely dead.

DS: You're about to publish a collection of short stories and poems, titled *Together*, with another Zimbabwean author, Julius Chingono. This has been a project to symbolically link a black writer and a white writer in one volume. Could you tell us how you met, what you have in common, and how the collaboration came about?

JE: I met Julius at the Intwasa Festival in Bulawayo - I can't remember when. I found him to be a warm-hearted man with a mind like a razor blade... What can I say? He's a poet of transcendence. We are both old men. He is a blaster; my father was a blaster ... I can't recall how the idea for a collaboration came about. I think it was quite spontaneous, and the publishers at 'amaBooks went on to facilitate it. The Culture Fund very generously donated funds, which made the project possible.

DS: Would you say your writing challenges the idea of a homogeneous, monocultural Zimbabwean nation and tries to explore and create space instead for multicultural dialogues and realities?

JE: At Independence, the government purported to be Marxist-Leninist with a touch of Mao and a nudge of Stalin, and its academics used that framework, blended with Nationalism (shall we call the mixture Mugabeism?) to create a homogeneous, monocultural Zimbabwean nation. Consequently it excluded “angry jesters” like Marechera, and only whites who were abject confessors, like Bruce Moore-King (who wrote *White Man Black War*), were paid marginal attention. You had to be a son (preferably not a daughter) of the soil. So in that context, yes, I do agree that my writing endorses multiculturalism; and so does the writing of Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga, and any number of the up and coming young Zimbabwean writers. Mugabeism is slowly crumbling, and the singers, actors, visual artists, and writers of Zimbabwe have made, and are making, their contribution.

DS: What draws you to the genre of satire and what do you try to achieve by it?

JE: How else could I write about a chartered company called Rhodesia? And, more recently, a Limited Company called ZANU PF? Where’s the romance? Where’s the mythology? It’s all to do with money, this unholy alliance of multinationalism and corrupt governance. Satire gives power to the powerless to ridicule the empowered. As Alexander Pope said: “Those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous.” When you combine humour with moral outrage you get ... well ... me.

DS: Zimbabwe’s predicaments appear to be fruitful pickings for international career-minded academics; but you don’t seem convinced they are doing anything in the least bit helpful. In *Hatchings* a Scottish social scientist, for example – let me quote from it - is doing her PhD on “the role of nostrils in the transition from puberty to adulthood in left-handed Zimbabweans” and an Australian psychologist is doing his PhD on “the correlation between intelligence and penis size in bilharzia-infected men who live within a ten kilometre radius of the Mzingwane Dam” (Eppel 2006: 73). Then there is the sketch, in the *White Man Crawling* collection, about Doctor, Doctor Lisbet Schwartzenhaeger, who does no less than three PhDs theses following

the phenomenal success of “The Dog Motif in Racist Rhodesia” (Eppel 2007a: 53-55). Do I detect a touch of cynicism about academics and academia?

JE: More than a touch. I worry about new fashions in literary criticism especially and I think there’s a real problem with postcolonial/feminist/poststructuralist literary critics who are always quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, Homi Bhabha, Julia Kristeva, and Henri Lefebvre, and sprinkling their critiques with words like “subaltern” and “troping”, and “chronotope”. I find they’re not so interested in a writer’s craft as they are in his or her context, a context that provides them with a space to exercise theory. If the author mixes his or her metaphors and misuses punctuation, they’ll see it as either a deliberate or a sub-conscious form of subversion against colonial hegemony, penile hegemony, etc., etc. There is something parasitic in all this ... rebranding an author with the new tools of the literary trade and parading them in the Emperor’s new clothes.

DS: Your characterisations of academics and critics are too generalised I find, but you nevertheless voice valid criticisms ... To return to your writing, in fact no-one comes off lightly in your satires. Earnest NGOs, trying to “make a difference” in Zimbabwe are also parodied; and they join a range of other expatriates in your books depicted as a misguided lot. Is this because you think they are part of the problem, not the solution to Zimbabwe’s woes?

JE: When NGOs began flooding into Zimbabwe after independence most of them were extremely hostile to white Zimbabweans. We were all tarred with the same brush. I can remember on more than one occasion, at some social gathering, NGOs engaging in conversation with me and my ex wife (an extremely courageous human rights activist), and after a while, asking us whether we were from Australia or New Zealand. When we replied that we were Zimbabweans, they would simply walk away. It was hurtful to say the least.

I think there have been quite a few studies done on the contribution by NGOs to African welfare, and the general consensus seems to be that 70% of all aid money goes into expenses incurred by the NGOs themselves. Toyota 4X4 double-cabs are not cheap; neither are futile workshops. What upsets me about many NGOs is the damage they unwittingly do to the fabric of Zimbabwean society. The story I wrote, called “Ashes” (Eppel 2007b) is based on fact. I won’t deny that some NGOs like

Oxfam have done very good work in Zimbabwe but, on the whole, I'd say they are part of the problem, not the solution.

DS: More daringly, you have also turned your satirical sights on the controversial land revolution in Zimbabwe – for example “The Very High Ranking Soldier’s Wife” (in *The Caruso of Colleen Bawn and other Short Writings*) who seizes a farm from an old white couple, beating them so severely that they are hospitalised for two weeks. And in “An Act of Terror” (in *White Man Crawling*) for example, it is the ZANU-PF Women’s League, the ridiculously obese wives of the Minister of Spare Parts and the Deputy Minister of Workshops, Conferences, and Heroesplushes whom we laugh at. While your characters, I think, have a cartoonish appeal they nevertheless represent a class or set of persons instantly recognisable to Zimbabweans. But whom do you write for? And aren’t you ever afraid of reprisals?

JE: I *am* afraid of reprisals. I have put things in print that other people have been severely punished for. I know I am being watched. Who isn’t in a police state? But what did Yeats say: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” I’m not brave like the members of WOZA [Women of Zimbabwe Arise] who seem to spend more time in jail than out of it. I don’t go into the streets with banner unfurled; I don’t write and perform subversive plays. I sit in the relative security of my home and tap out words. But I *do* have conviction – that I should treat people the way *I* would like to be treated, that I should not turn a blind eye to the wickedness of those who have too much power, that I should value the future on a timescale longer than my own. I write for a national and an international readership but nobody seems to read me. That’s probably why I haven’t had my thumbs broken!

DS: Indeed ... that could be one advantage to not being widely-read! Sorry to make light of it. But as Stanley Nyamfukudza (2005: 23) famously said, also despairing about the lack of a reading culture in Zimbabwe, “one of the best ways to hide information in Zimbabwe is to publish it in a book.” That said, I think your latest novel *has* been well-received and is reaching a wider readership. I’d like to talk about *Absent: The English Teacher*. Here your protagonist George Jorge George, the errant English Teacher, is wrongly blamed for putting up a portrait of Ian Smith instead of Robert Mugabe in the metalwork room at Girls and Boys

Come Out to Play Secondary School when a government official comes to visit. Sacked and jailed for this misdemeanour, then later kidnapped by the Chief Inspector of the police and forced to give free private lessons on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and on Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* because he is trying to get his A-Level in English Literature, we go from the sublime to the ridiculous. And the role of the teacher in society, in this case the English teacher, comes into focus. It is in this respect I find the novel most interesting. Chinua Achebe famously argued the African writer is also a teacher (of history, culture, social mores, etc.) and, by implication, should be respected as such. Part of the sadness about George's downfall is that he is downtrodden, taken for granted, not afforded the respect he deserves. You yourself are both a writer and an English teacher ... To what extent do you agree with Achebe that the writer's role, in Africa at least, is as much as a teacher as an artist?

JE: My favourite writer is Charles Dickens and any perceptive reader of my prose writing will detect his influence on me. I read *Oliver Twist* when I was ten years old, and I've been reading and re-reading his books ever since. Dickens taught me how to satirise, to parody, to caricature. He also taught me about man's inhumanity to man (something which was going on in front of my very eyes in Rhodesia, and continues in Zimbabwe). So, without being didactic, by showing rather than telling, I think the writer's role is to teach through his art. That certainly is the case with Achebe whom I admire.

DS: And yet you choose quite a different form and style to Achebe: not traditional realism but perhaps we could call it a type of Menippean satire, 'a carnival sense of the world' in Bakhtinian terms, a sort of grotesque realism, where roles are reversed, there is much eating, drinking, and fornicating - and the very high are brought very low. This you do with great humour but also sad irony. George is the unwitting victim of an absurd form of racial revenge. Not only is he punished for supposedly proclaiming Ian Smith instead of Robert Mugabe; he also has the misfortune of bashing into Ms Beauticious Nyamayakanuna (mistress to the Minister of Child Welfare, Sweets and Biscuits) who relishes the opportunity of subordinating him, taking his house and turning him into her domestic servant. What motivated you to highlight the issue of reverse racism in this manner? And can you comment on belonging to

Zimbabwe's white minority (often vilified for its colonialist past) - the challenge this presents to you as a writer?

JE: When Mugabe played his trump card, the race card, after he lost the referendum in 2000, reverse racism began in earnest in Zimbabwe. Twenty years of gradual but largely sincere reconciliation was wiped out. The multicultural classroom is a good place to monitor these developments. Goodness knows what those children in the Border Gezi institutions [which have been likened to Hitler Youth camps] were taught but you can be sure that demonising white people was high on the agenda. Colonial history was rewritten by the nationalists, and nationalist history has been rewritten by the so-called patriots, the Border Gezis and the Eliot Manyikas, reified by the likes of Chenjerai [Hitler] Hunzvi and Joseph Chinotimba. ... The most insidious aspect of this is that many black Zimbabweans, especially the nouveau riche, justify shameless behaviour on the grounds that they aren't to blame. The government never takes the blame for anything that goes wrong. And this attitude, this attitude of "no shame, plenty blame" has filtered down to the community at large ... This has hurt me. I spent many years, in my writing and in my life, trying to make up for our collective guilt – the generations of colonial oppression. My first satire, *DGG Berry's The Great North Road*, the bulk of which was written in 1976, is directed exclusively against myself and my own people. The bumbling protagonist, Duiker Berry, is my alter ego quite as much as the elderly George J George in *Absent: The English Teacher*. There's also a lot of guilt in my early poetry. But I am now 62. I have spent more than half my life as a Zimbabwean being in many ways disadvantaged as a white man ... I used to feel that being neither African nor European was a handicap for me, that I had slipped through the crack; but now I see it, not as a crack or a flaw, but as a threshold with all the paradoxical richness of thresholds.

DS: Are you aware others take a somewhat different view? Another Zimbabwean author, Chenjerai Hove, said in an interview, "the white Zimbabwean community was not trying to partake of the total national programme; they had a lifestyle which was outside everybody else's and Mugabe exploited that". (Primorac 2008: 139). In fact he suggests the white community has only itself to blame for setting itself up as a target. And he alleges whites even helped precipitate the crisis of 2000 by being filmed signing cheques to the MDC, thereby

creating a propaganda tool and playing into Mugabe's hands. All this appears to contradict your view that there was twenty years of gradual but sincere reconciliation prior to the crisis of 2000. How do you respond to Hove's view?

JE: I agree to a large extent with what Hove says, but it is a generalisation.

DS: Yes, quite a problematic generalisation. But did you yourself challenge that sense of white detachment that Hove identifies?

JE: Not all whites buried their heads in the sand. More than anything else, in the 80s, I wanted to be part of the Zimbabwean writing scene. I joined the Writers' Union, I supported and helped promote Amakosi [Bulawayo's grassroots theatre company]. I helped organize poetry readings, I sent my manuscripts, without success, to all the Zimbabwean publishers. At the risk of sounding plaintive, my feeling was that the Zimbabwean writing community rejected me, not the other way round. When my first novel, "DGG Berry's *The Great North Road*" won the M-net prize (in 1993), press releases were immediately sent to *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*. Neither newspaper mentioned it.

DS: You've made it clear you yourself tried to integrate but felt marginalised. What about the white community at large though?

JE: Twenty years of gradual but sincere reconciliation was certainly my experience in Bulawayo. Sceptics are welcome to say that I was deluding myself.

DS: Education and schools are a focal point in much of your writing and significant to your commentary on the nation. And yet, from *DGG Berry's The Great North Road* through to *Absent: the English Teacher* and in your short stories as well, schools have ridiculous names (Prince Charming High, Black Rhino High, Apricot High, Pawpaw High, Grapefruit High, Girls and Boys Come Out to Play High, etc.) What's the reason for this?

JE: I became a teacher by default: it was the only way (because of the government grant) that my parents could afford to send me to university. I didn't think I'd stick it out but here I am, forty years on, still teaching – happily. And yet I disliked both primary and high school. Things I dislike, that make me miserable, often become focal points for my satire; and, after all, my mentor, Dickens, slung a stone or two at British schools. The schools you mention, with ridiculous names, are microcosms of Rhodesian culture. Especially after independence, the dwindling white community

held on to their way of life through sports clubs, churches, and private schools. There is something pathetic but also something heroic in this. If I ever write another “school” satire, based on my experiences at Christian Brothers College, which has an elderly white headmaster and a 90% black enrolment, it will be motivated by affection. Most of the government schools, on the other hand, have become focal points for mismanagement and corruption, microcosms of the ruling party.

DS: Finally – another question about where you think you belong. Several southern African authors, amongst them Doris Lessing and JM Coetzee (both Nobel prize winners in fact) have felt it necessary to leave Africa at some stage in their lives – despite having their sensibilities shaped indelibly by the continent. Can you imagine yourself ever leaving Africa and writing elsewhere?

JE: All the trees I have planted - in my garden and the school where I teach - I want to watch them grow; and if I’m lucky enough to die on my bed, I’ll be able to see, before my eyes close for good, the canopy of a *Commifera mollis* (which I once nicknamed the Elbow Tree) and a crested barbet tugging at its fruit... so, no (how I love rhymes), I can’t imagine myself ever leaving Africa and living elsewhere.

DS: Thanks for sharing your thoughts and opinions.

Notes

¹ Poems to compare in this regard are “Matabele Dry” (1960s) with “Our Last Hotspell” (1990s) in John Eppel’s *Songs my Country Taught Me*.

² Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, Robert Mugabe’s ruling party since independence in 1980.

³ Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, was originally “owned” and run by the British South Africa Chartered Company.

⁴ These are or were ruling party politicians and/or war veterans in the forefront of the so-called “Third Chimurenga”, the controversial land revolution.

⁵ Movement for Democratic Change, the opposition party formed in 1999.

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