

10-2007

## Review: Michael Chapman, ed., "The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s" and Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner, ed., "Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi"

Shane Graham  
*Utah State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english\\_facpub](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english_facpub)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shane Graham. Review: Michael Chapman, ed., *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s* and Lindy Stiebel & Liz Gunner, ed., *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*. *ARIEL* 38.4. 169-73.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [dylan.burns@usu.edu](mailto:dylan.burns@usu.edu).



Book Reviews

Michael Chapman, ed. *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s*. Introduction by John Matshikiza. Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 2001. 241 pp. \$54 cloth.

Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner, eds. *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. 375 pp. \$103 cloth.

The negritude movement had *Présence Africaine*; the Harlem Renaissance had *Crisis* and *Opportunity*; South African writers of the 1950s had *Drum* magazine. Paul Gready has written that *Drum*'s "flashy muck-raking journalistic style attempted to capture the vivid life of the townships. *Drum* became a symbol of a new urban South Africa" (146); for Rob Nixon, it "amplified the voices of a defiantly impure cosmopolitanism, projecting an urban look and ethos" (28). Lewis Nkosi, who went to work for the magazine in 1957, said that *Drum* "wasn't so much a magazine as it was a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve—urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash" (*Home and Exile* 8). The magazine serialized novels by Alan Paton and Peter Abrahams, and occasionally published the work of black American writers like Langston Hughes.

Perhaps the most important function *Drum* played, though, was to serve as a launching pad for the careers of a whole generation of young black and mixed-race fiction writers and journalists: Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, James Matthews, Peter Clarke, Arthur Maimane, and Richard Rive, among others, published their earliest work in the pages of *Drum*, and Ezekiel Mphahlele reached a wider audience through the magazine's readership. Michael Chapman pays tribute to this remarkable legacy in his invaluable little collection *The Drum Decade*. This is actually the second edition of a book first published in 1989, with a new introduction by John Matshikiza, son of Todd Matshikiza, one of the earliest writers for the magazine.

*The Drum Decade* includes stories by all of the above-mentioned authors, as well as pieces by other well-known writers like Alex La Guma, Henry Nxumalo, Nat Nakasa, and Casey Motsisi. Some of the stories are readily available elsewhere—those by Rive, Mphahlele, and Modisane, for instance—but it is illuminating to see them in their original form and in the context of other *Drum* stories. Chapman gives us Modisane's "The Dignity of Begging" as it originally appeared, with an ending that "shifts from the ironic tale of the beggar-survivor to an ambiguous celebration of rural homecoming" (17), rather than in the revised version that appeared in the anthology *Darkness and Light* in 1958. Thus, even the inclusion of the more familiar

## Book Reviews

stories contributes to the historical value of this collection. But the book's real interest, for this reviewer, lies in its selection of writers who are scarcely remembered today. One such writer is Dyke H. Sentso whose story "Under the Blue-Gum Trees" won the first *Drum* short story competition in 1953. Sentso published a handful of stories in *Drum* between 1951 and 1954, but then virtually disappeared; "Blue-Gum Trees" shows what the world missed from his failure to realize his potential. Ostensibly a story about a paternalistic farmer and his relations with his farmhands, the story's subtext is the mechanization of rural life; it shows a society in the midst of radical transition and modernization.

Indeed, South Africa's rapid transition into an industrialized urban country provides the backdrop for most of these stories. The first one, Alfred Mbeba's "Rhodesia Road" from 1951, depicts simple peasants from rural Nyasaland who travel to Salisbury in search of work, and are amazed and frightened at the life they find there. But the later stories (Chapman has arranged them in chronological order) reflect *Drum's* shift to an urban perspective; most of the characters are *from* the city, and see it through more jaded and worldly eyes. They may lament the loss of rural values and traditions—the characters in "Love Comes Deadly" by Mbokotwane Manqupu "cry for Shaka" (68) in the face of Johannesburg's violence; the narrator of Rive's "African Song" tells us that "the ways of the Great Cities are not good" (119); Nakasa describes the life of the boxer "King Kong" Dhlamini in "wild, stabbing, over-populated Johannesburg" (166). But unlike the protagonists in the "Jim Goes to Jo'burg" narratives of an earlier era, these characters do not return chastened to the countryside; for better or for worse, the Africans depicted in the pages of *Drum* belong to the city, and are there to stay.

One of the most interesting features of *The Drum Decade* is Chapman's loose definition of the short story: as he says, "the entire *Drum* writing exercise forces us to examine assumptions about story-telling forms and purposes" (195). Several of the pieces are in fact instances of journalism rather than imaginative fiction: Nxumalo's "Birth of a Tsotsi" and "Mr. Drum Goes to Jail"; Themba's "Let the People Drink!"; Mphahlele's profile of Lilian Ngoyi in "Guts and Granite"; and Motsisi's "Kid" stories—all of these are non-fiction articles exposing urban social conditions in apartheid South Africa. Yet as Chapman notes about Nxumalo's work, "it includes several conventions of the fictional approach, such as the colloquial story-teller's opening remarks, descriptive evocations and the introduction of particular testimony" (195). Conversely, all of the fictional stories are informed by the gritty social realism that characterize *Drum's* journalism, and which typify later generations of apartheid-era literature. Chapman provides a convincing genealogy for the

## Book Reviews

apartheid-era realist aesthetic by revealing that the modern South African short story has its origins in a hybrid of imaginative fiction and politically charged reportage.

I have only one quibble with the new edition of *The Drum Decade*: Chapman's afterword has not been updated from the 1989 edition, and shows its age in certain respects. His comment that Mphahlele's *African Image* remains proscribed by the government, for example, does not diminish the value of the historical context provided by the essay, but it does tend to jar the post-1994 reader. A more serious limitation is the bibliography, which fails to account for such groundbreaking critical accounts of *Drum* as those provided by Dorothy Driver, Paul Gready, or Rob Nixon. More generally, the failure to update the afterword is a missed opportunity; Chapman's thoughts on the relevance of *Drum* to literary studies in the post-apartheid era would have been most welcome. Even given this shortcoming, though, *The Drum Decade* is a must-have text for any specialist in South African literatures.

One of the key figures from the *Drum* generation, Lewis Nkosi, is missing from the stories assembled in *The Drum Decade*. Nkosi joined the magazine's staff later than Nxumalo, Matshikiza, Themba, and the other founding writers, and he did not seriously turn his hand to creative writing until the 1960s. His legacy is well accounted for, however, in Stiebel and Gunner's anthology *Still Beating the Drum*. After an excellent introduction by the editors, the text consists of three parts: Part One, "Writing on Lewis Nkosi," collects critical essays about Nkosi's work by scholars in South Africa, Europe, and the United States. Together these essays survey the entire scope of Nkosi's writing career, including criticism and non-fiction essays, stage dramas, radio plays, poems, and prose fiction. Part Two, "Lewis Nkosi in His Own Voice," includes a 2002 interview with Zoë Molver, a 2003 public conversation with Achille Mbembe and Nuruddin Farah, and six seminal non-fiction essays by Nkosi himself. Part Three provides a comprehensive bibliography of Nkosi's writings, a select bibliography of criticism, and a timeline of his life and career.

In the interview with Molver, Nkosi himself admits that "I'm more known or acknowledged as a critic than as a writer of fiction" (224). Frankly, I have long believed that there is good reason for this. Although his fiction and drama is intellectually interesting, I have never been particularly moved by it, but in the words of contributor Chris Wanjala, "Nkosi is one of the most accomplished non-fiction writers that the [African] continent has produced" (31). In recognition of Nkosi's importance as a critic and essayist, the editors of *Still Beating the Drum* begin the book with three essays on his

## Book Reviews

non-fiction writings, by Wanjala, Annie Gagiano, and Oyekan Owomoyela. Gagiano's essay is particularly useful for helping us to see the strengths and shortcomings of Nkosi's critical judgments, but also to observe how his aesthetics and his attitude toward the writer's social role inform his own creative work.

One goal of this anthology, the editors declare, is "to reintroduce Lewis Nkosi, in all his facets, to academic scrutiny" (xxvi). Their claims for his importance as a writer are modest: "What has emerged, we argue, is the profile of a literary figure with accumulated critical gravitas" (xxvi). Perhaps because Nkosi's artistic legacy is untested and uncertain, many of the essays in the collection offer not so much interpretations of his work as evaluations of its merit. Thus Lucy Graham gives us a critical overview of the reception history of his 1986 novel *Mating Birds*, arguing that this history "poses questions that have yet to be addressed within the South African literary establishment" (163). Andries Oliphant in turn uses Nkosi's own criteria for judging the work of other African writers to evaluate his second novel *Underground People* (2002); in particular, Oliphant looks at his uses of authorial irony, the absence of which Nkosi has long complained about in the fiction of many of his black compatriots.

Some of the essays, on the other hand, do begin to construct interpretive frameworks for reading Nkosi's corpus. Those essays have convinced me that I need to pay closer attention to that body of work, and that Nkosi's fiction is highly relevant to the post-apartheid moment. The editors note how paradoxically productive the situation of exile was for him: "though cut off physically from South Africa, he has had to make himself 'at home' in exile, make movement and displacement his friends—even sources of inspiration" (xxiv). Though apartheid has ended and many exiled writers have returned home, many others continue to write about South Africa from abroad—Zakes Mda, Zoë Wicomb, Achmat Dangor, and Sindiwe Magona, to name only a few. Thus Lindy Stiebel's essay on "nativeness" and spatial dynamics in *Mating Birds* offers insights that go far beyond that novel. Similarly, Sikhumbuzo Mngadi's observations on the "sex-race question" in Nkosi's plays *The Rhythm of Violence* and "The Black Psychiatrist" extend far beyond the sexual politics of apartheid, and a comparative study might shed light on such post-apartheid works as K. Sello Duiker's novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, preoccupied as it is with questions of race and sexuality.

If *Still Beating the Drum* makes a strong case for the significance of Nkosi's work, though, it also makes for frustrating reading, for reasons beyond the editors' control. This frustration arises from the unavailability of many of the texts under discussion. Kwela Books in Cape Town, which published

## Book Reviews

*Underground People* and his most recent novel *Mandela's Ego* (2006—too new to receive attention in Stiebel's and Gunner's collection), has also recently reprinted *Mating Birds*. Nevertheless, those books are not particularly easy to find in North America. Meanwhile, Nkosi's seminal collections of essays—*Home and Exile* and *Tasks and Masks*—are out of print, as is his play *The Rhythm of Violence*; "The Black Psychiatrist" and his radio plays are nearly impossible to obtain. Stiebel, Gunner, and Rodopi Press have done South African literary scholars a great service by reprinting Nkosi's important essays on "Fiction by Black South Africans" and "White Writing," for example. But what is needed is a *Lewis Nkosi Reader*, which would bring together all his most important essays as well as his poems, short stories, and plays. With any luck, *Still Beating the Drum* will spark a resurgence of critical interest in Nkosi's work, and perhaps some generous publisher will oblige.

Shane Graham

### Works Cited

- Gready, Paul. "The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties: The Unreal Reality of their World." *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newell. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. 144–55.
- Nixon, Rob. *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Nkosi, Lewis. *Home and Exile and Other Selections*. 2nd ed. London: Longman, 1983.

---

Clara A.B. Joseph and Janet Wilson (eds). *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions*. Amsterdam: Ropodi, 2006. pp. 326. \$103.22 cloth

The collection of essays edited by Clara A.B. Joseph and Janet Wilson *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions* (2006) claims for itself a broad mandate. The editors' introduction asks a series of wide-ranging questions, beginning with the following: "how are literary and cultural representations shaped by the times, specifically of postcolonialism and globalization? What is the role of the creative writer and critic...?" (xi). With both the terms postcolonialism and globalization defined in varying, and even diametrically opposed ways, it is no surprise that the papers included in this collection engage a wide variety of texts and approaches in grappling with these broad questions. The subjects covered in individual essays range from using new media to develop "adequate representations of a culturally concerned, ethical tourism" (Martin