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by different authors (in contrast to those by
the same author) through their increasing ascen-
dancy get notably suspect as doing a dis-
service to the literary canon because most of
the new talents that have been published in
anthologies do not become fully fledged art-
ists with robust voices, vision and literary ca-
reers. Their expressions are mainly scanty and
incidental fly-by-nights existing 'obscurely'
only on the pages of the anthologies.
In view of this, it is worth reiterating that
artistic production is still largely an individu-
alistic pursuit. Robust and vibrant artistic in-
dividuality, expressed in equally robust and
vibrant artistic productiveness over a period
of time, engenders a definable, easily
recognisable character - call it the corpus of
the artist - and thus establishes a lasting the-
matic, stylistic and technical basis for con-
sistent reference and discussion.
Hopefully, the writers within Trembling
Leaves would grow far beyond their tenta-
tiveness and their short-stories, and in time
establish, each of them, their unique, vibrant
voices, vision and styles, and thereby con-
tribute a meaningful plus to the prestige of
the heritage they are committed to uphold.
Afadama is a businessman and literary critic.

From your child, with love

Lookman Sanusi, Toyin Adewale, Richard Mammah (eds), OPEBI THE
HUNTER AND OTHER STORIES. Synergy Educational (with Mace Books),

An experimental literary offering. Nineteen stories produced by cer-
tain Nigerian primary school pupils under the auspices of
Synergy Educational's story
writing competition, initiates the Nigerian lit-
erary landscape into a new tradition of chil-
dren literature written by children them-
selves. This example is an effective challenge
to a hitherto dominant tradition of children
stories written by adults from the perspec-
tive of and for the perspective of the child. Ex-
amples of the stories abound: The Drummer
Boy by Cyprian Ekwenyi. Chike And The River
by Chinhua Achebe. Without A Silverspoon
by Eddie Isho and so on. These books, by
every intent and purpose, have been and will
continue to be considered and accepted with
an appropriate seriousness befittng the estab-
lished literary canon.
In fact, after an adult reading of Opebi
The Hunter, the feeling that develops is that
of a pleasant encounter of a curio: an aggre-
gation of children's perceptive and cognitive
potentials clothed by a very raw inno-
cence, naivety and promise. Seriousness of
acceptance and consideration may not be
on immediate response, aided by a nagging
suspicion woven from such puzzling
thoughts as: aren't these stories merely a re-
hash of those heard from adults? Are they
really original and imaginative? Can children
really be storytellers with a confidence and
deliberateness of thematic and technical in-
tent comparable to the matured and experi-
enced mind of the adult storytellers? Can
these stories stand rigorous criticism?
Yet the anthology is truly a surprising re-
flection of the narrative imaginativeness and
effort of very young people who, from the
newest seeds which in the sprouting stage
of this literary offering, will grow to become
formidable materials for further literary
growth and expansion. This is the convic-
tion and vision of the editors and publishers
and thus, the stories are presented as a seri-
ous and ingenious affair, to which a reader's
consideration is understandably important.
The stories are mostly and essentially,
moralistic-didactic portraiture, animal and
human stories operating within the mode
and tradition of oral literature which in this
instance are expressed and presented in the
written medium. The resources of orality as
regards development and presentation (the-
matic and structural) are judiciously adhered
to and utilised.
The themes examined which are varied.
are of the consequences of greed, arrogance,
jealousy, lasciviousness and of be-
ing calli ve, others are retribution or poetic
justice in the face of inhuman treatment or
evil and the glories of responsibility and hu-
maneness.
With the exception 'The Promise', 'The
Wicked Nurse', 'The Stranger', 'Opebi The
Hunter' and 'Olaolu And Ego', all the other
stories (exemplified by 'The Blessed Family')
are very restricted in development. But what
they lack in length is compensated for by a
certain succinctness and ingenuity of the-
matic unfolding. Toromi The Good Boy' ex-
presses in a deeply touching manner the in-
evitability and finality of death. Toromi is 'a


very good boy... respected his elders and everyone liked him" (p.55). Yet, in spite of this, he is poisoned by his jealous friends at a party and this sets in motion the process of his death. With a moving song of anguish and helplessness by both mother and child, his mother 'laid out his bed and Joromi lay down and died'. The essential goodness of Joromi, his loss of father at a very tender age, as well as the pointless poisoning by friends accentuates the impact of his undeserved, unexpected tragic end. By contrast, the assured death of Obi in 'The Wicked Step-mother' seems a well deserved punishment for a mother who has inadvertently poisoned her own son while in actuality she aims to eliminate by food poisoning the two children of her rival in marriage. Much resembling this mother is Okima in 'The Wicked Nurse' who loses her only child to death instigated by retribution. Her wickedness, by a pattern of not paying attention to patients, goes too far when she unknowingly refuses to attend to her own daughter who has been brought into hospital after being knocked down by a vehicle.

'Musa And The Big Fish' is a grisly, incredible tale. A headstrong Musa, defying his father's warning, goes afishing and encounters a mysterious fish that talks. On the request of the fish, Musa will kill, cut, try and ultimately eat the fish. Because of this, his stomach swells so much that it fills a whole room until he dies. There is magical realism in this, which exists also in 'The Magic Needle'. A tailor's lazy wife uses a certain needle brought by an old man to sew, and after that, whatever she touches grows very big in size. The realism becomes more absurdly fanciful in 'The Naughty Boy' wherein a snake takes John away for three years. When he is eventually returned, he is completely reformed of his naughtiness. Oliaku and Ego are carried off to safety by an Eagle after being knocked down by a vehicle.

The Promise' which is the most thematically and structurally comprehensive of the stories, is a tale about love which is genuine, deep and resilient. Love, by the travails of Amina and Tunde, is portrayed as patient, long-suffering, result-oriented and having an uncanny power to surmount obstacles. The love hinges on a promise of the two lovers to marry beyond their educational pursuits. But the realisation of this through the years is tortuous as both have to overcome, firstly, the sentimental restrictions of their classically opposed backgrounds and circumstances; because Tunde, the boy, is from a poor home, a Christian and a Yoruba, whereas Amina, the girl, is of a rich family, a Muslim and an Hausa. Secondly, they will have to overcome the sudden and unexpected attempt of Amina's father to marry her to the son of his friend in Kaduna. Divine intervention in the form of a motor accident thwarts this marital attempt because Amina is critically injured and her brother loses his life. What is more, Amina's whereabouts is unknown to her lover and parents till years later. But what is to the advantage of the lovers' prospect is their education, liberality, honesty, generosity and an infinite dedication to each other's happiness. The story ends on a very happy note as their promise is eventually realised.

The Stranger' expounds a vision of an ideal society, where people show concern for one another, trust themselves and completely abhor stealing. It is a fundamental contradiction of what is our problematic world today where evil reigns supreme and stealing and corruption are elevated to the ideals. The stranger is an image of a foreign and corruptive influence intruding into the community. But the deleterious impact of his thieving presence is quickly observed by the people and the authority and is effectively checked through a procedure unique to the society.

Though scanty in many respects and deserving of some improvement, it is a commendable effort that aims to sustain the presence and tempo of literary activity among a very young generation. It reassures that the folk-tale of traditional Africa is still very much alive and well, even surprisingly among those
very young people who are born and bred within the city. The city is the veritable repository of urbane, very mundane cross-cultures, the astute purveyor of foreign influences and imitations: it is the variegated cosmopolis that thoroughly and relentlessly reaches out to everyone through its pluralistic radios, televisions and newspapers. But inspite of all this, the young storytellers of Opebi demonstrate original cultural responsiveness and continuity and a commitment to a better humanity.

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If you can talk you can sing  BY HELEN ATAWUBE YITAH


If you can walk you can dance is Marion Molteno’s third work of fiction. It is also the winning entry for the year 1999’s Best Book Category of the Commonwealth Writers’ prize for the Africa region. Considering the fact that the selection process for this prize is one of the most rigorous in the world today, a book like this must have a lot to its credit. A general trend among writers of literature had been to take the English man’s language, dislocate his syntax, recharge his words with new strength and, more importantly, new meaning. Molteno is no exception.

The novel takes its title from a Zimbabwean saying, ‘If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing’. It is a stunning piece of work, deeply imaginative, psychologically subtle and overwhelmingly musical. In fact, the world of the novel is a dance into discovery, of inner being, of the ‘foreigner-element’ in man, that part of him that is always craving to be recognised, to be known. Molteno is no exception.

The novel is not easily categorisable under any of the common labels for novels - thriller, adventure story, picaresque, epic, etc - because it is all of these and more. It ostensibly tells the story of Jennie, a young white South African lady. Born in Bloemfontein into a wealthy family, Jennie is not amenable to circumscription of any kind. She is resigned to living in reaction against any external imposition, or in relief from it, a quality that sets her constantly moving across borders, across cultures, touching and being touched by the people she encounters. In this sense the novel is a complex of many stories - of Neil, the musician, Michael the retarded child, the village women of Mbabane and the Nylga Plateau.

As we watch Jennie’s transformation from the little girl whose boundaries, geographical and otherwise, are limited (by herself) to her father’s house and its garden, into the student-turned-human rights activist, and then the exile who is always both at home and a stranger wherever she goes, we also appreciate the compelling changes of time, place and circumstances which hurry her from one socio-politico-personal scene to another.

For Jennie, music is both a metaphor and a reality. This duality is one fascinating quality of the novel which has to be experienced to be appreciated. It successfully fuses the simple with the complex, the elliptical with the elaborate, strange with familiar. Perhaps it is Jennie’s (and Molteno’s) way of coming to terms with the chaos of the modern world. Which is why the harmonising effect of music plays such an important role in the novel.

The mbira, the string musical instrument that was an old Swazi man’s parting gift, symbolises in the novel cords of togetherness, participation and above all, self-discovery. The resulting music, alone or with accompaniment, is a release of synergy that is arresting, which is why it always catches a crowd. In such moments ‘the whole universe is a dance’ in which every round opens new vistas of knowledge, creative energy and a new set of motives which activates the next round. False steps are not noticed, or if they are, there is neither time nor need to dwell on them. Music is the reason for being, and everyone is in harmony.