

A WINNING QUARTET
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***Quartet*. Compiled and edited by Richard Rive. Athlone: Realities, 2008.**

The republication of *Quartet*, edited by Richard Rive, and long out of print, is an important literary event. It was originally published in 1963, then by Heinemann in the African Writers Series in 1965, and is now republished by Realities, a publishing house based in Athlone. This collection helped to put black South African writing on the map in the early sixties. It was, however, banned in South Africa - because it included four stories by Alex la Guma, then listed in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act. (At the time of publication he was living in Cape Town, but subject to a five-year banning order.) All four writers had some association with District Six (Rive and La Guma were born there), and all began to publish their work in a variety of magazines and newspapers in the late 1950s (*Drum*, *New Age*, *Fighting Talk*, *Contrast*, etc). Their publication by Heinemann brought them to the attention of a world audience eager to sample the literature that was emerging from Africa. Rive, La Guma and James Matthews are each represented in the collection by four stories, grouped thematically into four sections. The fourth writer, Alf Wannenburg - the only 'white' writer in the group - also had links with District Six and was part of Rive's writing circle.

It was Richard Rive who supplied the impetus for this collection, and his contribution to our literary culture - as writer, anthologist, literary critic and cultural broker - needs to be fully acknowledged. This collection contains some of his best early stories, including the much-anthologised 'Rain', which vividly registers the sounds, sights and smells of the District one rainy, wintry evening. It explores the dilemma of Siena, a girl from a rural mission-station community, and focuses on her increasing desperate search for her womanising boyfriend. It reveals Rive's assurance (at this early stage in his career) in his evocation of setting and atmosphere, in his handling of dialogue, and in his presentation of character and situation. It is important to note that these are the original versions of Rive's stories, not the somewhat sanitised versions that appeared subsequently in his short story collection, *Advance, Retreat* (1983). One of the benefits of this anthology is that it makes these original versions readily available.

Rive's four stories vary in terms of style and subject matter. 'Strike' is a thinly fictionalised account of its protagonist's involvement in strike action - and 'Boston' is clearly a stand-in for Rive himself (the description on page 18 is clearly a self-portrait.) 'No Room at Solitaire' - set in the bar of the only hotel in a small rural dorp on Xmas eve - is clearly indebted to Bosman in its style and manner. It employs the conventions of the oral-style tale, uses characters who are representative of a rural, Afrikaans-speaking community, and its sly satire is clearly indebted to Bosman. The story is, in fact, something of a slylistic *tour de force* - as well as being an example of the indirect mode of protest to be found in Rive's some early writing. The protest is more overt and outspoken in 'Resurrection' - perhaps the most personal of these early stories. Here the focal character is Mavis, the dark-skinned daughter of a 'coloured' mother who is ostracised by her siblings, who successfully 'pass' for white. It is a powerful, if over-insistent, exploration of her pain and hurt at her exclusion. The original version of the story (printed here) restores the final paragraphs which are crucial to its effect, and which were (inexplicably) omitted from the 1983 version of the story.

The collection also includes some fine examples of James Matthews's early writing. 'The Park' explores a recurring South African situation – the coming-to-awareness of skin colour as a signifier of inferiority. It captures a young boy's pain, incomprehension and rage at his exclusion from a 'Whites Only' park, and is an excellent example of the mode of protest writing associated with the 1950s, and with the District Six writers in particular. Much of the impetus for this writing stems from the anguish or insecurity experienced by those who were classified 'coloured' – situated on a sliding scale somewhere between 'black' and 'white'. Several stories reveal an acute sensitivity to racial signifiers (such as hair and skin colour) and suggest the shame and stigma which had come to be associated with colour. Rive's 'Resurrection', and La Guma's 'Out of Darkness', 'Slipper Satin' and 'A Glass of Wine' all point to the damage caused when racialised definitions of identity are internalised and turned against members of one's own family or community. Dating from the late fifties or early sixties, these stories are an important indicator of the psychic trauma and dislocation caused by apartheid. The impact was perhaps felt most acutely by members of the marginalised 'coloured' community.

Matthews's 'The Party' is of interest partly for the light it throws on the delicate relationship between aspirant writers (like himself and Rive) and the circle of ('white') writers and patrons of the arts who recognised and promoted them. (It is not difficult to recognise the real-life counterparts of 'Ron' and 'William'.) 'The Party' should be read alongside Wannenburg's 'Debut' which details the inept attempts of 'Paul' (who is 'white') to gain acceptance at the party of a working-class colleague in District Six.

La Guma's short stories are often overshadowed by his novels, and the republication of four of his early stories in this collection reminds us that it was initially as a short story writer that he made his mark. 'Nocturne' was entered for a short story competition run by *New Age* and first published on 24 January 1957, and reveals him as an accomplished writer of realist fiction. The story introduces us to the distinctive features of the La Guma world – an ugly, degraded world inhabited by people whose lives seem to lack substance and meaning. This is, of course, the world of his memorable novella, set in District Six, *A Walk in the Night*. Another of his stories, 'Out of Darkness', draws on his own experience of the Roeland Street prison, and anticipates later stories ('Tattoo Marks and Nails') and his third novel, *The Stone Country* – set entirely within the walls of the prison. The story allows us to glimpse the tormented inner world of one of the prisoners, 'Ou Kakkalak', and gives us some insight into what it was that had unhinged this evidently cultured and well-educated man.

The importance of this collection is not simply historical, although it is clearly part of what Brian O'Connell (in his Foreword) calls our 'intangible heritage'. *Quartet* is an indispensable text for any student of South African writing. These stories reveal the pressures to which this talented group of writers was responding, and suggest the future direction their writing was to take. They will speak to the memories and life experience of many former residents of the District, who still await their return. They were written before nostalgia or sentimentality (or solidarity literature inspired by 'the struggle') intervened to influence representations of the District. In this collection District Six is simply a given, part of the life-world of its characters. The issues of colour and identity which these stories explore continue to cast their shadow (like the sign in 'The Park') over the post-apartheid present.

Rob Gaylard

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