

fiction can be both descriptive and evaluative, that the context they build up may be not only an historical and formal actuality, but an occasion for celebration and praise.

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The City as Metaphor: The Short Stories of Cyprian Ekwensi

Cyprian Ekwensi (born 26 September, 1921) has been described as "the Nigerian Defoe." He is "a key figure in the historical development of modern West-African writing in English."¹ He has written five full-length novels. The latest, *Survive the Peace*, is about the recent Civil War in Nigeria.² Ekwensi is also the author of seven short novels and the editor of *New Nigerian Writing* (1977), an anthology which commemorates the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria in January 1977. In 1968 he was awarded the Dag Hammarskjold Prize in Literature. He has two books of short stories; his last collection, *Restless City and Christmas Gold*,³ is reviewed here.

Ekwensi is popularly known as an urban novelist; and not surprisingly, the fifteen short stories in *Restless City*, except "One Night Every Year," are set in the city of Lagos. A keen social commentator, Ekwensi declared in a recent recorded interview by Voice of America that he likes to look at life "in the raw," to write about "the values or non-values in our society." He is committed to truth in life and transposes it in fiction. He believes that the recognition of a writer in his own home should be his greatest achievement, and he has been so recognized not only in Nigeria but in English-speaking Africa.

One of the title stories, "Restless City" is about the dilemma of young ambitious Nigerians who come home (after many years in the U.K.) to face the harsh realities of their country. They are disillusioned by the rat race for material wealth in the city of Lagos. Their youthful high ideals for their fatherland evaporate with the first shock from the craze for money. "Come back Elena" is about the wreck of the happy married lives of Elena and Vincent Chuma. It is also a look at the working of the deep recesses of a proud and jealous mind. The murder of Elena by Denis Okefa is the tragic lesson of wrong assumptions, suspicions, accusations, and anger in marriage. It is also a result not only of hurt pride, but more importantly, of a misplaced confidence in the power of wealth.

Ekwensi's favorite subject is the daily occurrences in society especially romantic love.⁴ It seems evident, from "The Great Beyond" and "One Night Every Year," that he is weak in handling supernatural and mysterious tales.

¹Ernest Emenyonu, *Cyprian Ekwensi* (London: Evans Brothers, 1974), back cover.

²See *International Fiction Review*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (July 1978), pp. 164-5.

³Cyprian Ekwensi, *Restless City and Christmas Gold* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

⁴See, for instance, *Jagua Nana* (London: Hutchison, 1961).

"The Great Beyond" is an incongruous piece in *Restless City and Christmas Gold*. What emerges from the story is the author's strain for moralizing by enjoining the reader "to make amends for all he had done wrong" before he dies (p. 39).

"Bus Stop Mystery" is an absorbing detective story about the strange death (unrevealed at the end) of a young girl, Grace Kolia, in a Lagos City bus. Ekwensi shows knowledge of how a crime reporter goes about his detective business. The reporter combs out pieces of information and tailors them into a coherent and logical sequence. (The author's impression of the city, "the wickedness of the city in the bitter struggle for survival" [p. 57], recalls that of another student of city life, the nineteenth-century American novelist, Stephen Crane.) In "Death of a Pathologist," Ekwensi handles another detective story superbly.

"The Indispensable" is a short but intense episode about the death of Dr. Leonard Kalu, a specialist surgeon, from overwork. It presents a clash between public and private duties. Dr. Kalu's death is a culmination of the fears of his protective wife, Ada, that his obsession with his medical profession would destroy their family life. The obvious lesson of the story, as of another—"Dark Christmas," is that nobody is indispensable in society. But Ekwensi appears to be unaware of the larger question raised by the doctor's death. His moral intent seems eccentric in a country where humanitarian and devoted doctors are few and far between.

Christmas is the season when most women's excessive vanity yearns for indulgence. In "Christmas Gold," Ekwensi satirizes the misconception some rich city dwellers have about Christmas. Instead of goodwill and happiness, jewelry, palatial parties, nice clothes and dances are for Ma Bimbo, and her type. Joke in another Christmas story, "Eku Palemo Odun!" all that make for "joy" at Christmas. On the other hand, Sisi Tola is satisfied that this Christmas "no one is ill" in her family. She sees in their peaceful living more blessing than Christmas gold. The spiritual decadence associated with this Christian festival is a reflection on the preoccupation with material possession in contemporary Nigerian society.

This collection of short stories portrays Cyprian Ekwensi as a moralist. He focuses on different aspects of violent and nonviolent crimes, on romantic love in the city of Lagos, and uses these themes as vehicles for commentary on some of the cultural tensions in urban African society.

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KURT VONNEGUT

Slapstick

New York: Delta, 1977. Pp. 243. \$3.95.

In narrative structure Vonnegut's latest antinovel, *Slapstick*, has the short breath of a man who swiftly grows impatient and bored with his own ideas and jettisons them, either by dumping fragmented paragraphs where they stand, or appending little meaningless phrases at the end. These phrases are the