

repetitive rhetoric of certain African writings and oral narratives which resist linear chronology and sequential form. On the last score, Okri maintains in *Songs of Enchantment* an intertextual dialogue which gives high visibility to his African sources and influences (notably, Tutuola, Soyinka, Fagunwa, and Armah).

The novel is not without its problems. While the stupendous force of Okri's poetic imagination and verbal invention, and the brilliance of his imagery, cannot be denied, it is to be doubted whether his surging lyricism is really suited to the epic form. Through narratives 500 pages (*The Famished Road*) and 300 pages (*Songs of Enchantment*) in length, the zeal of his surreal imagery remains unwearied, but it begins to weary the reader, and the spectacular transformations eventually become tedious, the tropes turgid. Additionally, much has been made of the energy of redemption and the ambitiously hopeful gestures and resolutions with which Okri, in both his fiction and his poetry, tempers his savage picture of political oppression. In the new novel it transpires that the task of redemption and creating "a new cycle of world justice" falls to "the luminous jugglers of dreams" who are "escape-artists from the hell of our accumulated negative perceptions," the ones who create "realities" with their "thoughts" (290, 295). This begs the question of exactly where, except in the inward-facing consciousness of the appropriately named "escape-artist," the novel's utopian projections of ideal political justice occur. The artist's personal salvation seems at times to have been mistaken for an act of political salvaging and the essentially sublimatory and consolatory view of art that emerges—the view that the artist's vision can transcend even the worst sufferings—is pitifully unequal to the world of violent political oppression portrayed in the novel.

The fictional road through Okri's enchanted forest, never famished of poetic resources, has been negotiated with an inventive exuberance that is not to be found in any other contemporary Nigerian writer. But after 800 pages of phantasmagoric apocalypse sweetened by romantic utopian effusions, one seriously wonders whether Okri's super-highway has run itself into a formal cul-de-sac. His second *abiku* novel, like his first, is an awe-inspiring achievement. Yet, as Dr. Johnson said of another poet's epic, no man wished it longer. One hopes that at the end of even the longest road there must, somewhere, be a new turning.

Denis Hirson and Martin Trump, eds.

*The Heinemann Book of South African Short Stories: From 1945 to the Present*

Ibadan: Heinemann, 1994. \$10.95

Reviewed by Jamal En-neh

In this anthology, Denis Hirson and the late Martin Trump have collected twenty-one of the most representative short stories in contemporary South African literature. The collection covers a span of forty-seven years, which witnesses the rise and the fall of the National Party and its notorious Apartheid policy. Most of the stories are politically charged and, as Hirson writes in the introduction, reflect the totality of the human condition in twentieth-century South Africa. Racial segregation and its egregious effects on individual relationships,

disillusionment, conflict, and the desire to transgress are some of the dominant motifs in these stories.

In this anthology, as in others, the problem of representation is a thorny one. Some of the questions an anthology on South African literature inevitably raises concern who truly represents South African literature: outsiders or insiders? Is the hybrid structure of society, despite the limitations imposed by repressive institutions on writers, faithfully rendered into the text? Do social and political apparatuses determine creativity, or is it simply a volitional act, an individual commitment to a particular cause? Where do the selected authors stand in relation to the canon? Is it appropriate to define a specific textual corpus as mainstream literature?

In the context of South African literature it is extremely difficult to validate any given approach, no matter how airtight or plausible it might appear. And though he does not expatiate on the issue, Hirson acknowledges the challenges of the project. His main concern, as he outlines it in the introduction, is with texts which explore "the core of the human condition in South Africa" (3). The anthology, therefore, is an attempt to cross the boundaries of race, gender, ethnicity, language, and ideology. There are stories written by Afrikaners, Zulus, and European immigrants. Though some, such as Elise Muller's "Night at the Ford," Hennie Aucamp's "For Four Voices," Etienne van Heerden's "Mad Dog," Bartho Smit's "I Take Back My Country," were originally written in languages other than English, they have nonetheless kept their distinct local character. In "Mad Dog," for instance, the difficulties of country life, mostly due to the harshness of the climate, the arduous struggle to adjust, and the need to survive in the midst of hardship and insecurity, are lucidly rendered from the Afrikaans.

Besides race relations, the theme which characterizes South African writing in general, some of the stories draw on the discrepancy between city and country life and the paradoxes inherent in each. In their depiction of crime, violence, destitution, and squalor in the land of affluence, these stories lean towards a form of rough realism. Johannesburg frequently figures as the city of paradoxes par excellence. It is an Eldorado, or "Egoli" as blacks from the townships and immigrants from neighboring countries look at it, but also happens to be the site of violence, poverty, prostitution, and exploitation. Some of the stories also focus on the communal values of specific ethnic groups and their peculiarities, as in Ahmed Essop's "The Hajji." The presence of indigenous rituals is strongly felt in stories inspired by Zulu folklore. In fact, some Zulu traditional practices attract both blacks and whites. In Jack Cope's satire, "Escape from Love," witchcraft proves physically and emotionally detrimental. Franz falls prey to Zulu witchcraft and nearly ruins his life and his wife's after having fatally wounded his dog. Bheki Maseko's "Mamlambo" also touches on some aspects of witchcraft, namely traditional medicine, revealing the extent to which its spells can affect the lives of those exposed to it.

Though the stories have a number of things in common, thematically and structurally, there are still vast areas in which they differ fundamentally. They do, however, reflect the mosaic structure of the South African society and its multiple realities. In fact, it would be safe to affirm that there is no national literature

proper in South Africa, but diverse literatures inspired by different cultures, identities, and ideologies. One important observation Hirson makes, which is also corroborated by the texts, is that black South African writing tends to abrogate the distance between the author and the work, whereas that of the whites has an opposite inclination. While it acknowledges the existence of a wrongdoing, it also distances itself from "the raw nerve of the black condition in particular, and human oppression in general" (2).

This collection of short stories, though it excludes Doris Lessing and William Plomer, two fine prose writers, remains a good introduction to contemporary South African literature. Most of the selected authors are well established as novelists and critics. Whether critiquing repressive institutions or satirizing the follies of human beings, their work truly mirrors the spirit of the time.

Margaret Atwood

*The Robber Bride*

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993. Pp. 546. \$28.99

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

*The Robber Bride* is an account of three women—Tony, Charis, and Roz—friends since college days at McClung Hall, University of Toronto, in the sixties, as they try to reconstruct a view of Zenia, "*The Robber Bride*" (341) herself. "The Rubber Broad is more like it," reflects irrepressible Roz, "her and those pneumatic tits" (342). Each woman friend possesses an idiosyncratic variety of intelligence that informs her narrative—Tony intellectual, Charis intuitive, and Roz shrewd.

Antonia Fremont, *Tony*, is a historian with an obsession with war, who reconstructs mediaeval European battles in her cellar sand-table map, with cloves and beans for warriors. Tony inhabits a turreted Victorian Rosedale house, while her lover, West, creates aural mayhem in his *Headwinds* studio upstairs. Tony's quirks include a compulsion to spell words backwards: West's real name is *Stewart*, but he hates *Stew*, and so Tony reverses his name, calling him *West*, although she knows his name reversed is really *Wets* (16). "*All history is written backwards*, writes Tony, writing backwards" (127). Author of *Five Ambushes* and *Four Lost Causes*, Tony teaches "Merovingian Siege Strategy" (24) and composes *Deadly Vestments: A History of Inept Military Couture* that chronicles "Murder by designer" (28), for the button fly causes needless deaths, Tony theorizes.

Charis, pronounced with a hard *c* like *karma*, as Atwood instructs us in her Acknowledgments, is an incarnation of the sixties flower child, teaching yoga and growing an organic garden. Draped in Indian prints, she works for Shanita, queen of the Tarot cards, at *Radiance*, a shop selling crystals, reborn in the Recession as *Scrimpers*. Born *Karen*, Charis sheds her destructive self and hides Karen in a psychic suitcase after abuse by her disturbed mother damages her beyond repair.