



Fools And Other Stories

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These stories from the closing days of apartheid rule in South Africa won the Noma Award, Africa's highest literary award, and announced Njabulo Ndebele as an assured and impressive literary voice. He has gone on to become one of the most powerful voices for cultural freedom on the whole of the African continent today. Ndebele evokes township life with humor and subtlety, rejecting the image of black South Africans as victims and focusing on the complexity and fierce energy of their lives. "Our literature," says Ndebele, "ought to seek to move away from an easy preoccupation with demonstrating the obvious existence of oppression. It exists. The task is to explore how and why people can survive under such harsh conditions." About Njabulo Ndebele: now Chancellor of Witwatersrand University in South Africa. Ndebele began publishing these stories from exile in Lesotho during the 1980s. Ndebele is now recognised as a major voice in South Africa's cultural life. This is his only fiction collection available in Europe or North America. Ndebele's stories first began appearing in Staffrider magazine, an innovative publishing venture linked to the Soweto branch of South African PEN. Founded after the bloody Soweto riots of the mid-1970s, the magazine took as its symbol the staffriders, un-ticketed commuters from the black townships who every day clung onto or balanced on top of buses and trains to get into the cities to work. Staffrider magazine, and in particular Ndebele's stories, helped define a new tone in black South African literature that went beyond and finally overcame apartheid.

Fools And Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Fools And Other Stories for online ebook

Sibo Majola says

Brilliant, Njabulo. Life as it is. A clear lens, and no sentimentality. You really are one of the sharp observers of the southern half of the continent. Lovely writing, clear philosophy. Beautiful words.

Zaynab says

amazing book. explores human flaws and aspirations in an incredible way.
a must-read if you're in an intellectual mood

Mariana says

Good about boys and young men growing up in Soweto.

Nhlanhla Dube says

Really nice to read this and find its not all politics in your face. Njabulo Ndebele writes beautifully. It's so lacking in pompous posturing. He's really truthful and faithful to his characters and the subject matter. His language is so erudite and real and there are passages that are very moving. There's too much obsessive discussion about obvious things in SA literature - politics, etc. - which of course is understandable. But here we see real people in real situations and the politics takes care of itself. How nice.

David McDannald says

This is a charming collection of stories. "Uncle" was particularly good, as the visiting uncle of the young protagonist teaches the boy about life in a series of funny situations. When Uncle faces a man in the street who's armed with a club and shield, he starts throwing rocks. Later, he tells the boy that if there hadn't been rocks, he would have thrown sand. He says, "when one does fight one must do it very well." Poignant and recommended.

Phumlani says

This book evoked memories of growing up in dusty streets, playing football, first crushes, streetwise uncles, street fights, township burgeoise and generally brought me tons and tons of nostalgia. I love this book, i love the stories it tells, i love the raw real feel of all the stories, i wished they would go on and on..

Owen says

stories about young men coming of age in a culture of masculinity, families rising to middle-class in a colonized country, and finally two fools, a young-revolutionary and a middle-aged amoral loser. a totally pleasurable read written by an sensitive insightful author.

Matt says

Njabulo Ndebele writes an essay in “Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction” that proposes an approach to literature that challenges conventions. In his short story “Fools”, he incorporates the dynamic Zamani, an example of a character comprised of many social processes. Ndebele also shows how his criticisms of superficial characters can be creatively broken; he includes stock characters that act as surface symbols and sets his story in an implicitly political climate. However, Ndebele relies on the complex force of Zamani’s character and the “narratively engaging plot line” to transcend these elements. “Fools” is not just a schematic for the practical application of the theory in “Turkish Tales”. “Fools” is an addendum; it expounds upon the guidelines laid out in “Turkish Tales” through Zamani’s complexity.

First, we will look at how Ndebele adheres to his theory in “Turkish Tales”. Ndebele provides a textbook example of a character that transforms rather than informs. “[I:]nvolving readers in a transforming experience” requires an effective narrative point-of-view (Turkish 29). “Fools” starts with Zamani’s view of Zani. Zamani provides us with biased, connotative diction: “He wore an overcoat...with useless buttons on the sides” (Fools 152). The reader by default empathizes with Zamani: He has been troubled by bad dreams, is on his way to “school assembly” (153), and he has “had so much abuse heaped on [him:] in the last few years” (156).

Not until halfway through the story does Zamani explicitly name his crime: “they fired me for rape” (219). The reader has become too emotionally invested in Zamani’s perspective by the time the truth is stated plainly. Rather than backtrack and refuse to identify with a rapist, Ndebele compels us instead to press on. The reader can only now search for enlightenment in a place deemed unenlightened by society: the mind of a rapist. If Ndebele tells “Fools” from a different character’s perspective, “[t:]he result is not knowledge but indictment” (Turkish 28). Ndebele uses this phrase to discuss when a reader is told how to feel, rather than when he or she learns how to feel. Zamani would have been indicted as a rapist early on in the story by most characters, but hearing his side of the story strips the reader’s power of moral dismissive judgment.

Zamani is a model for other theories explored in “Turkish Tales”. If Zamani is a complex character rather than a “finished [form:] of good or evil” (Turkish 28), then, logically, he leads “us towards important necessary insights into...social processes...involving readers in a truly transforming experience” (Turkish 28-9). Zamani is not a static character, but a series of processes. Was the rape a lapse in judgement, or an accurate reflection of his character? Is he properly atoning for his past? Can he ever be forgiven, and if so, does he deserve forgiveness? The reader can’t categorize Zamani’s actions and behaviors into strictly black and white terms. He or she must attempt to understand Zamani rather than define him, to arrive at knowledge of his humanity rather than a verdict of his morality. Ndebele succeeds in creating a fluid character.

Now, we will discuss how Ndebele triumphantly portrays a teacher as his main character, despite admitting a common pitfall of South African writers: “teachers...have been condescendingly promoted as symbols of African progress...these figures were perceived as caricatures of sophisticated white men” (Turkish 30). Ndebele accuses teachers in other South African fiction of being only black on the outside, but modeling and projecting the academic behavior deemed suitable by white oppressors (Ndebele doesn’t specify what this

caricature entails, I imagine a teacher promoting growth but within the confines of a society structured by whites).

Ndebele depicts a teacher in Zamani. Zamani thinks, “[Mimi:] is the very reward of a teacher: her growth” (193). Then later, “The final, priceless gift of teaching! The gratitude of parents! [...] The final recognition of the worth of the teacher” (194). Zamani displays characteristics present in any great teacher, white or black – a selfless commitment to the growth of his students. Zamani puts aside his feelings for Mimi and regards her strictly as a student. She even greets him as “Teacher” (192). Has society overreacted to Zamani’s crime, if those involved are able to set aside tension so easily? The reader cannot so easily label Zamani when exposed to his benevolent inner thought processes.

Zamani is further distanced from his white colleagues with a black consciousness message to his impressionable young students:

‘You have just had your first real lesson since you came to school. And from today onwards, know that when you come in here to open your books ... the real school is outside there, and that today, that school was brought into this classroom for a very brief moment. And one day when that school out there is finally brought into this classroom forever, you will know that ... it is time to go on with your journey. (220)

Zamani refers to the “real lesson”, the “real school”. Zamani implies the school is run by supporters of “Dingane’s Day”, a holiday glorifying injustice to black Africans. Ndebele shows how teachers can be portrayed in South African literature not as caricatures of white men, but as strong black role models with great power in the classroom.

In the final phase of this essay, we will discuss how Ndebele breaks his own rules with Zamani’s duality as both antagonist and protagonist. Ndebele in “Turkish Tales” talks about the anonymity of villains, and how their status as mere symbols prevents a transformation in the reader to take place: “as far as [symbols of evil:] are concerned, we will find an array of ‘sell-outs’, ‘baases’ ... policemen, cruel farmers and their overseers ... township superintendents and their subordinate functionaries” (28). Ndebele in “Fools” has three of these undeveloped villains: the policemen, the principal, and the white man with the whip. All are depicted as impersonal oppressors, and they only appear once (except the principal, who appears twice). They stifle the freedom of other characters, and exit with no light shed on the process of how they became this oppressor. Through this lack of development, the reader regards them as the very same stock characters Ndebele denounces in “Turkish Tales”.

Ndebele makes these exceptions to his own manifesto because Zamani fulfills the dual role of both protagonist and antagonist. Ndebele writes “rtistic compassion only situates the villain within the domain of tragic acceptance, which in practice, translates itself into moral or political rejection” (Turkish 35). The reader knows that rape is wrong and morally rejects it. But, as mentioned earlier in this essay, the first-person narrative sympathetically aligns the reader with Zamani. The reader cannot simply morally reject Zamani as he or she does with the policemen, the principal, and the white man – he or she is persuaded to accept Zamani as tragically villainous.

When the reader relates to Zamani, they inherently relate to this tragic villainy also. Ndebele writes “almost all of us are, or were, or will be lovers. Thus, we feel with [Zamani and Nosipho/Candu/Mimi:], we can identify with their problem. What [I have:] done is build into [my:] characters ‘the emotions of the reader’” (Turkish 36, replacement mine). The reader identifies with Zamani’s emotions, and he is protagonistic. But, his actions are admittedly immoral, and he is consequently antagonistic. Zamani therefore fits Ndebele’s description of “the villain”, yet functions as a tragic protagonist.

Ndebele’s formula laid out in “Turkish Tales” can be found mangled in parts of “Fools”. Setting his tale in South Africa in the politically turbulent mid-sixties roots “[Fools:] firmly in time and space” (Turkish 27). Ndebele reluctantly observes in “Turkish Tales”:

[A:]rtistic merit...is determined...by the work’s displaying of a high level of explicit political preoccupation which may not necessarily be critically aware of the demands of the artistic medium chosen...If the average South African writer has chosen this kind of preoccupation, what effect has it had on his or her writing? One

major effect is that the writing's probing into the South African experience has been largely superficial. (28)

Rather than create an allegory as a symbol for apartheid angst, Ndebele thrusts his characters into the midst of strife. To deem Ndebele hypocritical based on this observation, however, would be rash. He is not "the average South African writer" whom he is warning. "Fools" is catalyzed by "Dingane's Day", a surface symbol that holds for the reader pre-packaged implications. But, "Fools" is not about this holiday. "Fools" centers around its characters and their evolution, and "it is this existence of a plot line that makes [Ndebele's:] novel more narratively engaging than [the average South African writer's:]" (Turkish 32, substitution mine). The setting grounds the characters, but does not limit the extent to which we may explore the facets of their social, romantic, and professional lives.

To applaud Ndebele as I have done, but not address my status as a critic, would be doing his work in "Turkish Tales" and my audience a disservice. I was born in a white American suburb in 1989. The events in "Fools" take place in 1966, in Charterston South Africa. Ndebele theorizes that "any research of radical interest...has to emanate from...the very current of the African struggle...[but:] has no organic relationship with that struggle" (Turkish 25), which I admittedly do not. He goes on to quote Michael Vaughan in an issue of English in Africa: "academic criticism of contemporary black literature must be extremely circumscribed...it is deprived of contact with the writers and public of this literature" (26).

My criticism may be discounted, but I cannot discount the profound effect of Zamani's character in "Fools". Ndebele causes the reader to strangely identify with and condemn Zamani, blurring the line of morality they began reading with. Ndebele makes a teacher operate within a white-influenced government and act on behalf of his students rather than become a vehicle for white oppressors. Ndebele defies his own theories with malevolent, symbol characters, but more than compensates when he questions the very relationship between hero and villain through Zamani.

Zamani describes Zani: "He had become his books, and when he moved out of them, he came out without a social language" (217). Ndebele moves out of the books of his fellow writers, and at times out of his own essay, and the result is a social language inclusive of protagonists and antagonists, and those who fall in the middle.

Works Cited

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Brendan says

If "Fools" and "Uncle" were the only stories in this compilation, it would be a five-star read.

Del says

Fools and Other Stories is a collection of five short stories set in black townships created by the apartheid government of South Africa. Unlike some of the more explicitly political literature of its time and place, these stories focus deeply on individual characters, relationships, and daily experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary. Despite the absence of overt political content, the stories reflect the limitations and sufferings caused by the governing and social structure.

The first four stories are from the perspective of children, revealing fears and desires both universal and unique to their situation. The fourth story is strikingly more mature in perspective and content.

Horace Barrington says

Very nice. From the blurb there is a useful summary, quoting the author where he says that South African writing needs to "move away from an easy preoccupation with demonstrating the obvious existence of oppression. It exists. The task is to explore how and why people can survive under such harsh conditions." That's refreshing. I'm bored with protest literature or continually angry exhortations. I'm interested in the way people react under those conditions. This book does that. Must read more South African literature of this type.
