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Peter Titlesta
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Although the cover of this interesting col
lection describes it as “A selection from the
2002 Caine Prize for African Writing”, this
applies to only five of its fourteen stories.
The bulk of the tales are, in fact, “Stories
from the African Writers’ Workshop 2003”
by authors who were invited to a work
shop held near Cape Town because their
entries had been shortlisted for the Caine
competition. The authors of this second
group are referred to as “youngsters” al
though stories by the two facilitators (Vero
nique Tadjo and Peter Merrington) are also
included here. The last page of the text use
fully explains the rules for participation in
the next Caine Prize competition.

The winning story is a heart warming
but by no means naive account culminat
ing in a huge family reunion: “In two days,
we feel like a family. In French, Swahili,
English, Kikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kizanda
and Ndebelo, we sing one song, a multi
tude of passports in our luggage” (26). This is the title story of the collection, but it is remarkable how appropriate this title is to most of the other stories in this collection even to the second story, whose protagonist is a young Nigerian woman who won an American green card in a competition. This poignant, complex story shows the protagonist’s uncomfortable, baffled but undeniable feeling that in her relationship with a kind and generous white American there is nevertheless an inescapable flaw “Your worlds were wrong” (34).

A brilliant story, translated from French, is Florent Congo Zotti’s “Small Hells on Street Corners”, in which the huge city market is itself a ‘character’, the sphere in which orphaned “man children, culprit children” (48) stand no chance of survival.

Rory Kilalea’s “Zimbabwe Boy” is street wise and poignant in taking on the issue of cross race homosexuality in Zimbabwe it depicts a fragile if somewhat unlikely encounter between a white farmer and a young black man who survives by “cruising”. The only South African story among the Caine Prize group is by Allan Kolski Horwitz; ironically titled “Courageous and Steadfast”, it examines the “post liberation blues” of a small group gathered in Durban for an NGO conference: “Nomsa laughs (...) ’The minute you opened your mouth, I knew you were another of those disillusioned but still loyal Nkrumah types’” (73).

The sadness of postcolonial poverty and vulnerability runs like a refrain through most of the stories. A vivid detail in “Lagos, Lagos” (the first of the Workshop tales) refers to the sort of pushy Nigerian mothers “who husband hunted for their daughters (...) forc[ing] them to marry rich ugly trad ers who spoke poor English and pulled their trousers up to their chests” (79) a comic detail in a story of disillusioned hope. The surreal after life story by Mbongisi Dyanti, “The Witch of the Land”, actually takes a strongly feminist, worldly stand; this is a South African story containing many brilliant, bitingly satirical moments and taking a sardonic position on the question “What is a witch”? (108).

Helon Habila’s “My Uncle Hezekiel” tenderly and ironically recollects a ne’er do well: the exploitative, irresponsible and hopelessly alcoholic, yet lovable and humane Uncle. Rory Kilalea’s story (in the second section) is spiced with juicy Kaaps (non standard Afrikaans) and set in Zimbabwe. It is punningly titled “Colours”: both the dead ‘listener’ and the surviving (but dying) woman narrator were/are “coloured”.

Horwitz’s second story is called “The Ad journment” this is a long and somewhat laboured account of a white lawyer who unexpectedly finds himself in jail, in the same vulnerable position as accused clients (from whom he is normally distanced). The central African civil wars and their attendant brutalities feature in “Do You Remem ber?” by Goretti Kyomuhende. A strange tale is Zachariah Rapoola’s; I am not sure that its surrealism succeeds, however the story fades out on a note of bafflement that seems intended to resonate. A “mysterious” woman evoked by a male writer/narrator features in this and the next story, “After Time”; here she is the narrator’s own, dying mother nursing her is both a terrible and a tenderly soothing experience: “I was (...) ridiculously happy. I couldn’t wait for her to die”(199). This is an accomplished piece.

I like the sardonic final story in the collection, Binyavanga Wainaina’s “Ships in High Transit”, which describes some tourists’ “African encounter” from the indigenous perspective: “Ngugi is only recom mended to those who came to Kenya to self flagellate (...) because their cause and their self esteem are one creature” (227 228).
Finally, the stories by established writers featured in this collection range from Peter Merrington’s rollicking Tarrantino meets the Cohen brothers, a very American (tall!) tale, to Veronique Tadjio’s and Shimmer Chinodya’s stories of unfulfilling love unfortunately the latter are both rather dis appointing pieces. But as the old man in Mbongisi Dyantyi’s story warns, “The wis dom hidden in a story is for kings to dis cover; a fool sleeps for lack of understand ing” (112).

Annie Gagiano
University of Stellenbosch

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