Y et Zimbabwe's is an extraordinarily sophisticated political economy. The manufacturing sector makes up over 30% of GDP, and the inheritance of the UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) levers give the state an unprecedented amount of control. Such realities have allowed Zimbabwe to steer somewhat clear of the IMF and World Bank 'market forces' steam-roller. Indeed, a report by the latter body is somewhat clear of the IMF and World Bank 'market forces' steam-roller.

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Peter Abrahams turned 70 in March.
We publish assessments of his work by Cecil Abrahams and Michael Wade

The Long Journey Home: A Portrait of Peter Abrahams
Cecil A. Abrahams

T
he Passport Officer at the Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston, Jamaica studied my passport and exclaimed with delight when he found out that I was from South Africa and, indeed, came from the same Johannesburg suburb and carried the same last name as ‘their famous writer Mansa Peter’. My connection to Peter Abrahams was the Passport Officer went out of his way to ensure that my trip through the formalities at the airport would go smoothly.

My first visit to Jamaica was for another purpose. However, since I grew up with the legendary history of my district’s most famous son, I knew that I would do everything possible to set my eyes on Peter Abrahams. Although he had left South Africa more than forty years ago, the voice on the other side of the telephone was still distinctly South African. After agreement and the necessary travel arrangements had been made, I made my first pilgrimage to ‘Coyaba’.

In his latest novel, The View from Coyaba (Faber and Faber 1985), Peter Abrahams describes Coyaba as ‘the places of tranquillity’ where the Arawaks took refuge from the invading Spanish. But, he continues, “It is not difficult to imagine this as the look-out spot, or the place of meditation to escape to, away from the daily rounds of a busy Arawak village” (p.11). He goes on to say that he and his wife, Daphne, had indeed found such a place of tranquillity in the Red Hills, and it is at their secluded and serene place that I met the short, slight, handsome brown man who extended his affection and gentle kindness to me.

Although removed from Vrededorp and South Africa for so many years, he still remembered the Afrikaans language spoken in Vrededorp and the many places of interest about which he has written so intimately. He also remembered vividly the awful human degradation of the blacks of South Africa. It was easy during that afternoon of talk and drink and deliciously prepared food to appreciate the fact that it was Abrahams’ early, difficult beginnings in South Africa which colour much of his fictional and non-fictional writings. In Tell Freedom and Return to Goli, he describes a place and a country that are filled with dire hardship and brutal racism for the majority black population.

Tell Freedom (Faber and Faber, 1954) relates tales of a South Africa before the birth of Apartheid in 1948. But even then the young Abrahams remembers many incidents of personal hunger and family and community poverty. Tell Freedom begins with the little boy pushing his ‘nose and lips against the pane and trying to lick a raindrop sliding down on the other side’ (p.9). Deprived of warm, comfortable living quarters, the young boy seeks security in his fantasy of the raindrop:

As the raindrop slid past my eyes, I saw the many colours in the raindrop ... It must be warm in there.

Warm and dry. And perhaps the sun would be shining in there. The green mist of

Peter Abrahams be the trees and the grass; and the brighteness, the sun ... I was inside the raindrop, away from the misery of the cold damp room. I was in a place of warmth and sunshine, inside my raindrop world. (Tell Freedom, p.9)

Tell Freedom goes on to describe aspects of ghetto life which Abrahams and his community endured. Often the reader is inundated with the smells, sounds and emotions of the hopeless slavery which they endured during the three centuries before his birth on March 19, 1919. It is, therefore, not coincidental that the major theme of his work should be that of the black person’s enslavement and the struggle to be liberated from that condition. There is a passage in The View from Coyaba which reveals to a large extent Abrahams’ reflective imagination and his view of the deleterious effects of slavery on the black drivers if he had been in such a position. Since Bagley had been a house slave, he had escaped much of the cruelty administered to the field slaves. However, from time to time house slaves were promoted to the position of drivers and they were expected to whip their own people. The thought of whipping his own people preoccupies Bagley in the following passage and leads him to an appreciation of Samson’s position:

They stayed on the hill a while longer, not talking, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Then Samson led the way down along the moonlight path. Behind him, Bagley wondered what he would have done if they had ordered him to be a driver and he had to whip people. He was terribly depressed by the answer his mind kept giving, no matter how he turned the question around.

Perhaps Samson was right. Perhaps their former slave masters had made a prison for their minds; a prison you could not see or touch, or even feel, unless you were a man like Samson and had suffered the pain he had and had a hill like his own on which to sit and see all the world and think. (The View from Coyaba, p.81)

Since Peter Abrahams had been born into the slavery of South Africa, and because he had to endure severe human hardship at the hands of white oppressors, he is in a position to appreciate Samson’s cruel enslavement. Furthermore, the fact that he has been involved in discussions which gave rise to independence struggles in Africa and Jamaica, he is like Samson, truly in a position to reflect fully on the history of black society and to recommend change. And to boot, ensconced in the aloneness of the Red Hills, he has ‘a hill ... on which to sit and see all the world and think’.

Like William Wordsworth’s portrait of Newton (The Prelude, III, 59-63, 1850):

I could behold
The antechapel where the statue stood
Of Newton with his prism and silent face.

The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone ...

Peter Abrahams envisions himself as a voyager seeking out the solution to difficult problems not confronted before. In many respects his work is an autobiographical portrayal of a circuitous and sometimes arduous journey which begins in South Africa, passes through Britain, and concludes in a physical sense in Jamaica, but continues to evolve imaginatively in Africa.

As observed earlier, the question of slavery preoccupies Abrahams in many of his books. His novel, Wild Conquest, tries to come to grips with the issue of the European invasion of Africa and the brutal conquest of the black communities and the subsequent role played by black drivers in the brutal oppression of the slaves.

At one point in the discussion Samson responds to Bagley would be responded in the same manner as the

on the View from Coyaba resemble to a large degree the pristine innocence destroyed by European deception and
The brutality that Samson and Xuma endure and the hatred which inevitably emerges from a land where people had been massacred, their land stolen and their country invaded by a white mob. Jacob's first reaction is to understand black enslavement and the white enslaving past. Their man and woman motivate them to reject the offer. Unable to co-opt them, the white man destroys their church and leaves David and Sarah in deep bitterness. David's dream being shattered, he dies. But David and Sarah had placed their seed in their grandson Jacob. He leaves for the United States and becomes a student of the history of those who seek power for themselves and not for their people, but who shamelessly use the past enslavement of their people to attain their personal goals. Such a leader is Josiah. Although Josiah starts off insisting on hard work and accountability by his ministers, thus winning the respect of the poorer classes of his country, he soon becomes an unbearable and cruel dictator that cares little about his country's well-being. He resents the substance with which the following passage demonstrates:

All day long the sleek little planes and the clumsy helicopters had criss-crossed the hills, flying low and yet out of reach of possible rifle shot. The men methodically patrolled almost as though they are looking for me. But he knew they were not. This was routine, part of the show of strength that had become habit even when there was no need for it and no one to whom to show it. The peasants of these hills now had to be shown this strength all the time. That was something Josiah had learnt from the Old Man. But whereas the Old Man had used this show of strength only in times of need, Josiah used it all the time. Josiah had once told him that you could never overdo a good thing, especially if it were a strength. Since a show of strength is a good thing, do it all the time. Fly the planes even when the peasants are cultivating their hillsides for a little corn and other ground provision. Make the show of strength a daily, a weekly, a monthly, a quarterly, a yearly event. Show the men and the women that there is going to be no stopping the power. Now fear was a long shadow over the land and its children. (This Island Now, p. 11)
Abrahams wrote his first stories and poems for publication when he was still at high school (Grace Dieu in Pietersburg and then St Peter's, Pretoriaville — the religious and political heart of the Marxist and later liberal agnosticism go deep and begin early); and these works made their impact on the tiny community of intelligent black writers in the late 1920s. For the story Abrahams presents a wide range of the realities and possibilities of black life in the industrial city. School teachers, doctors, domestic servants, miners, fops and pansies, the exotica of street life, black, coloured and white all come into sharp focus. Abrahams is immensely — sometimes extravagantly — fair in his treatment of them. Inevitably, he often works from stereotype — but he always works away from it, in the direction of a fuller realisation of his characters.

Thus Maise, the domestic servant, develops in the course of the narrative from an unremarkable, though pretty, presence in the entourage of the magnetic shebeen queen, Leah, into a source of folk wisdom and political support, and a symbol for the stamina of the masses.

But there is more than this to the achievement of Mine Boy. The novel is informed with ideas: perhaps the most powerful dramatic action in the narrative is in the clash between ideas, most centrally, between the initially simple initial responses of Xuma, as a black man, to the economic exploitation and political oppression of city life, and the ultimate complexity of his realization that against the evidence of his senses, he is involved in a struggle of all exploited human beings, regardless of colour, against their exploiters. In Mine Boy Abrahams presents a class analysis of South African society, which although not new itself, contains much that is original, not least the presentation of the destructive effects of urban exploitation on blacks from within. By contrast, Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country does not express a single original idea. I have written elsewhere of the excellence of the description of work (the major pillar for novelists of proletarian life, from Dickens on), the masterly dramatization in the action of the Marxist concept of alienation, and the sensitive and entirely credible account of the beautiful schoolteacher Liza's disintegration under the pressures and conflicts of the life of a member of the tiny black urban elite. But Abrahams' major achievement is his challenge to a whole white-dominated genre within South African fiction: he flings the gauntlet in the face of the keeper of the mighty fortress of inevitability, of black inferiority, of the white man's 'civilized' mission, of the blacks' inability to withstand the pressures of social change, the fear, the uncertainty of the white self-image in its fickle enactment of the saga of the migrant labourer.

And in his next novel The Path of Thorns he did the same again! This time it was the intensely serious area of misconception, that great white whale of South African fiction in the sensitivity and sincerity of his treatment of the love between Lanny and Sarie, and I come back to it in admiration and amusement, because of the historical context in which it was written) that final scene in which the black man and the white woman embrace, and they come together in their love. This is a revolutionary moment in the history of South African literature.

And in his next work Abrahams did it yet again. Wild Conquest challenged the centrality of the white pioneering myth of the Great Trek, enshrined in scores of novels, both Afrikaans and English, which fulfilled an essential task of reassurance and reinforcement to both language groups in the white community. Wild Conquest is a rather strained narrative, over-dependent on the very cliches it is challenging; and too derivative to have any possibility within South African fiction in the sensitivity and sincerity of his treatment of the love between Lanny and Sarie, and I come back to it in admiration and amusement, because of the historical context in which it was written) that final scene in which the black man and the white woman embrace, and they come together in their love. This is a revolutionary moment in the history of South African literature.

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nous and stories in Nigeria in the early 1950s; he and Ngugi became two of the most important writers in contemporary Africa. Abrahams' example clearly inspired many others as well! Abrahams visited West Africa in the 1950s, and in 1956 he published A Wreath for Udomo, a novel about the struggle for freedom from colonial rule and the problems of independence itself. Was A Wreath for Udomo a retreat into the reactionary positions that Abrahams had attacked with such intellectual subtlety in his earlier fiction? For today’s reader the book has the force of prophecy. Its description of the pitfalls and failures of the post-independence era (it was published a year before Ghana became independent!) may be over-manichaean, and the polarities of tradition and modernization over-simplified; but the course of events reveals an unanswerable peculiarity. The treatment of the themes of power and betrayal are as powerful as in any other African novel about the ideological commitment to liberalism is, if anything, extreme. Over the intense clash of ideas and emotions broods the scepticism and pessimism over the shortcomings of the Christian gospel as a lived experience. The Span of black life was changed by reading The World That Was Ours — he introduces a new theme of major importance: the incorporation into black life of the message of the Christian gospel as a lived ethical system.

In fact, the potential for every one of these themes exists in his earliest work; this is not the place to go into the details, but the fact must be recorded. The View from Coyaba weaves influences from the Old and New Testaments, Marx, Fanon, Du Bois, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Marcus Garvey and Pan-Africanism into a rich and deeply satisfying pattern. This The View from Coyaba turns out to be a summation, it will be a magnificently consistent final movement to the symphony of a lifetime's thought and writing. If there is still more to come, we the readers will be that much more rewarded.

I end on a caveat. There is a tendency in some quarters to appropriation, to make Abrahams the particularistic spokesman of a specific group, and to insist that his message should be understood only through a sort of authorized (not by Abrahams himself, of course!) refractation through sectional-ideological lenses. Abrahams belongs to everyone. His personal history, his work and his message ensure this. Any attempt to claim him in the name of ideological or sectional interests merely constitutes an injustice to his achievement.

Michael Wade teaches in the African Studies and English Literature Departments at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of the critical study Peter Abrahams (1972).

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10 SOUTHERN AFRICAN REVIEW OF BOOKS, June/July 1989
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SOUTHERN AFRICAN REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Benita Parry

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Prologue

11 July 1963

There was an evening that I will never erase all afternoon. It was true there had been many such days and nights; and the premonition is only recalled in its full oppression after disaster has been realised; many, many such times; the precise cause, the months and even the years of them have silently blurred, lost consequence. But not this one.

He had to be home by half-past six every evening. He had to be within confines of house and garden by six-thirty, not being permitted to leave again until six-thirty the next morning. There was even something of a secure feeling about this twelve-hour house arrest, because the children knew their father would always be home in the evening. Whatever I might be doing, however many times I was out, Dad would always be there for me. He had been under the restrictions of house arrest for nine months.

He had to report to police headquarters — Marshall Square — in the centre of Johannesburg every day between the hours of twelve and two, except on Sundays and holidays when he was not permitted to be anywhere else. This was a routine without any comfort-forbidding overlays. We had never discussed it, Rusty and I, but we both had the foreknowledge that he would walk into Marshall Square in the usual way to report, and not come out again. He only told me long afterwards that the daily reporting had become a nerve-cracking ordeal, that he had to take a deep breath before entering those dark-red brick walls every day to sign his name in the special book kept by the Sergeant in charge of those under house arrest.

It had been a big new book at the end of the previous year. The Sergeant had carefully headed the pages with the many names, several pages for each person. But one by one others had gone — some into jail, some into hiding, some out of the country. The Sergeant flipped over more and more unused pages as the numbers dwindled, until now there were only two left to sign — Rusty and Helen Joseph.

It was a Thursday in July, which is midwinter in Johannesburg. Rusty had left home at midday. He said: 'I'm going in to report.' Then I have to deliver some drawings. And this afternoon I'll be busy — I'll be home late.'

"Late" meant some time around six in the evening. 'Rusty was undeclared before, but he seemed half faindered, understanding. He did not understand our other activities. We had become so circumscribed, we were both under so many bans and restrictions imposed by the apartheid regime, that for us all political activity had become illegal. The first bans had been issued ten years before, when we had been prohibited from coming to a long list of organizations, and from attending any "gatherings": A 'gathering' had been defined as two or more people coming together for oral or written discussion.

To comply with such restrictions would have required us to abandon all active opposition to apartheid. We were incapable of such renunciation and never even considered it. We had continued to fear that much in the spheres that tangibly things, had had palpable origins rising from the blindness of the night.

Come home, I urged him in my heart. Come home!

Only two or three times before he had arrived back after six. He knew he had to allow time for the odd mischance, traffic hold-ups, car trouble, something like that. These could be cited in mitigation of sentence, but they would not affect the basic offence — breach of the conditions of house arrest, for which he could go to jail for anything up to three years. We took risks where it was necessary, we broke restrictions when it had to be done. But not in a way that invited sanctions.

Ten minutes past six. Quarter past. Once only had he come home at twenty minutes past six. Before, when he had come home late, I had been in the kitchen, watching the evening news. Now I was listening for the sound of car wheels on the gravel of our driveway. Then the slam of the car door, Rusty's footsteps into the house, his voice greeting the children in the front room, his progress to the kitchen to say "Hello!" and kiss me. And each time I had said, 'You cut it a bit fine tonight, didn't you?' a statement, not a question, reproach for the anxiety which could not be completely repressed. 'Just a bit fine, time,' he would say, 'ten minutes at least.' On that Thursday evening, at twenty minutes past six, I thought, I will hear the car, hear the slam of the door, he will come into the kitchen and once more I will say, 'You cut it a bit fine tonight, didn't you?'

At the precise moment, as I heard myself saying those words in my mind, I knew he would not come. Knew it with absolute and final certainty. Knew I would not hear the sound of the car door slamming, knew he would not again walk into the kitchen to the words of my mild reproof. I had not been told, but I guessed where he had gone, and with what finality of failure his attempt to return that evening was not necessary, the enormity of the consequences, the shape of the long ordeal that lay ahead. I felt a pain so strong it seemed to have physical origin, and I knew.

I knew he was not coming home that night, nor any night in the weeks and months and probably years ahead.

And I watched it that evening also while apprehension increased with the fading light, as though my fear, which was caused by no such things as tangible things, had had palpable origins rising from the lightning of the setting sun.

And more than anything else, a veneer of normal behaviour had to be kept so that the children did not become the victims of our involvement in a dangerous and complicated world of illegal activity — at any rate not more than was unavoidable.

The most difficult times they also prevented descent into any emotional morass, thereby denying me the questionable pleasure of 'letting go'.

Toni, nineteen, and studying to become a nursery-school teacher, was an adult and experienced enough in our way of life to guess at situations without questions. She was self-centred and touchy in normal times; calm, controlled and with abilities to cope magnificently whenever there was a crisis. Patrick, a handsome, moody and introverted adolescent, was as easy of camping trips. How much he understood of what we were doing, how much he accepted, how much he resented or hated could not be judged. He had become incapable of communication and was wrapped in his own world of grooping and dissatisfaction. Frances was eleven, questioning and separate in her relationships. Keith was six, our 'treasu-trial baby' — he had been born two days before Rusty was arrested for treason in 1956.

I longed to share the awful knowledge of what had happened, to discuss with someone what course of action to take. But the most important thing was to keep fear and the suspicion of disaster away from the two younger children. They would have enough to face when the time came.

My own behaviour had to appear normal and rational to the police, whose watch on our home, telephone-tapping and perhaps listening devices within the house itself, would keep them informed of anything unusual, suspicious.

I had an appointment (political) for later in the evening to meet a young lawyer friend, Bob Hepple. He was to pick me up at half past seven near a suburban hotel, and we were to go together in his car to meet others.

I suspected that Bob must also have been with Rusty in the afternoon. If Bob did not come that evening it would confirm my worst fears of what had happened. If he did, then the situation might not be as bad as I imagined. I had to go to meet Bob. But I could not leave the house. The police might come and raid. I had to be there.

In the front room Toni sat on a low wooden table in front of a blazing fire. She said, 'Daddy's late' — it was an unanswered question. We had supper, Toni, Frances and I, then Frances went next door to a friend. Toni and Claudia, the younger, who had worked for us for fourteen years, were filled with unspeakable anxiety. It was as though they both watched every movement of that evening, wondering "What's happened?" and in my mind I was giving them the answer — For us, disaster.