

# CAPTURING 'THE SPIRIT OF AFRICA'

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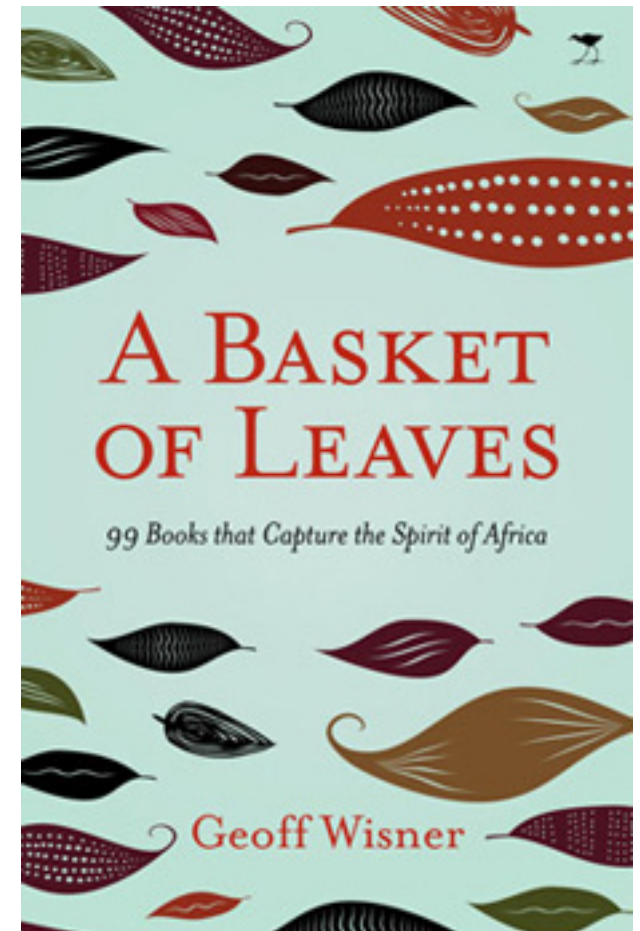
*Syned Mthatiwa interrogates the politics underpinning literary competitions and compilations in Africa. Whose voices get to define contemporary African literature and experience? Whose do not? Why? And what might be the consequences?*

Africa and her affairs have provoked the imaginations of many people over the years, both within Africa and beyond. Books of varying length and quality have been published about one or more aspects of the enigmatic continent and her people. While some of these manage to capture something essential about the continent others contain blatant lies and distortions of the truth about life in Africa. For the uncritical reader driven by curiosity about the exoticised continent, these may pass as true accounts of African life and experiences. True, the more than epic problems that afflict the continent (famine, civil wars, floods and disease, for instance) provide fertile ground for the breeding of lies and half-truths by local or foreign reporters, academics, and ordinary tourists hoping to make a name for themselves and a quick buck to go with it. Many such writers have gone on to become 'experts' on Africa, regardless of the fact that the Africa they know is but a small corner of the continent that they return to on the occasional safari or sabbatical leave.

However, not every would-be commentator or story teller has the opportunity to tell his or her story however good or truthful. Factors associated with the politics of publishing (such as the financial status of the writer, how well connected s/he is, and the business prospects of his or her manuscript) determine whose story gets to be heard. The usually white foreign journalist or tourist who is financially secure and is connected to one or two publishers may find it easy to get *their* distorted views and half truths about Africa and Africans into print; while the local, hardly known, poor black African wishing to correct such distortions may very well find him or herself labouring in vain. Who wants to believe a barely literate black African?

Granted, there are foreign writers whose writings have painted a tolerably acceptable picture of Africa, and whose efforts have resulted in the mitigation of suffering of many Africans. The efforts of such writers deserve commendation. But these are only rare exceptions to the rule.

There are African writers too whose voices have been heard. But with regard to some of these, too often the profiteering aspect of publishing comes to play an unenviable part. Because the risky venture the publishers undertook to publish the unknown African writer has proved lucrative as, contrary to their fears, the book managed to sell, the publishers return to the now famous writer for more stories, even when he (and they are usually male) has none further to tell. This has resulted in publication of trash by famous writers which sells nevertheless, while brilliant works of writers who have not yet made a name are suppressed. I am left wondering to what extent has this publishing gimmick impacted on the flow of stories about life experiences in Af-



Cover of *Basket of Leaves: 99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa*

rica and the canonisation of literary works from the continent?

Another publishing gimmick is the tendency to throw the curiosity-arousing term 'Africa' into book titles to boost sales. Such books claim to be representations of this or that aspect of African experience: African culture, African writing, African music, African politics, the spirit of Africa ... the list

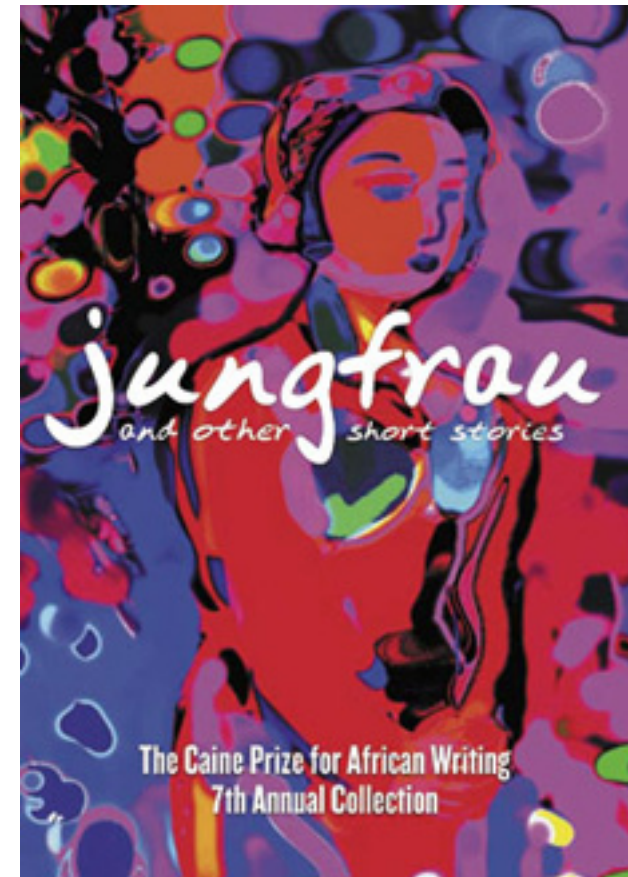
goes on and on. Such books provoke a wide range of questions such as: What is African culture? What is the spirit of Africa? To what extent can a book be representative of African writing? Can an anthology truly be representative of African writing? Can any single publication, fiction or otherwise, capture the so-called ‘spirit of Africa’? These are broad and difficult questions and I will not pretend to provide sufficient answers here. However, in what follows I attempt to address these questions and attendant ones, however tangentially, by examining two anthologies released three years ago that purport to represent the creative spirit of Africa.

I begin my examination with Geoff Wisner’s *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa* (2007), followed by the Caine Prize for African Writing’s 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Collection, *Jungfrau and Other Short Stories* (2007).

The American book reviewer, editor, and writer Geoff Wisner’s volume *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa* is an example of a book whose grand claim in the title does not stand the test of close scrutiny. Wisner, a tourist-scholar who spent six months on a volunteer programme in Zimbabwe, felt that he had, at the end of that brief period, read enough books about Africa written by both Africans and non-Africans that captured “the spirit of Africa” – whatever that means – to make him an expert. He, like many tourists before him, felt the need to answer the call to write a book that would act as a starting point for fellow tourists wishing to know the literary works from and about different African countries. The result was his *Basket of Leaves* published by Jacana in 2007; an ambitious work that offers brief reviews of the books he read and a list of suggestions for further reading.

Reading the volume one quickly begins to suspect that the claim made on the blurb that the book “provides a literary tour of the best-written, the most interesting books to come from every country in Africa” is deliberately misleading. The books reviewed in *A Basket of Leaves* are not the (only) most interesting books. The question begs: Interesting to whom? Certainly some of the books discussed are of no or little interest to me. Besides, some of them do not necessarily come from African countries – in the sense that they were not written by African nationals. The authors of the ninety-nine books also include Caribbeans, Americans, and Europeans, both black and white. Many of the books are simply *about* some African countries, and in some cases only make passing references to the African countries they are said to be about. Wisner tells us in the introduction that “Bruce Chatwin’s *The Viceroy of Auidah* describes nineteenth-century Dahomey, now Benin. Ancient Carthage, the scene of Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, is in modern-day Tunisia.” It does not require extraordinary intellectual prowess to realise that Dahomey is not the same as Benin, and Carthage is not the same as Tunisia.

The publication dates of certain of the books and the blatant racism inherent in some of them heavily compromise the claim in the book’s subtitle: *99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa*. For instance, with regard to Richard F. Burton’s *First Footsteps in Africa* (1987, but first published in 1856), Wisner says, “Burton’s descriptions of the people he travelled among are punctuated with outbursts of *scathing* contempt” (my emphasis). Several of the books were published as far back as the nineteenth or even eighteenth centuries, and some of these were written by expatriates, explorers, and colonialists with



Cover of *Jungfrau and Other Short Stories*

a jaundiced and one-sided view of Africa. For instance, the French writer Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Journey to Mauritius* (2003) was first published in 1773. In what sense, then, could such works be said to capture the so-called spirit of Africa? And what spirit of Africa would they be capturing? The spirit of ancient, pre-colonial and colonial Africa or that of post-colonial, twenty-first century Africa? (The problematic nature of the ‘post’ notwithstanding).

While *A Basket of Leaves* does indeed provide, “some sense of the rich literature on Africa” (or much better literature on particular countries in Africa), and may lead the curious-minded “to read some of the extraordinary books” Wisner “discovered on [his] literary journey around the continent”, as he hopes it would, the volume does not offer much insight to a present-day would-be visitor in terms of learning about a particular African country. Not least because some of the works are products of imagination (fiction) that, if not read carefully, might end up generating a peculiarly distorted view. I cannot help feeling, therefore, that the volume’s subtitle is a publicity stunt intended to attract the attention of curious would-be readers intent on discovering something about the proverbial “dark continent”.

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Interestingly, Wisner seems very much aware of the weakness of his selection system that, by his own admission, “can be criticised on various grounds.” He singles out racism as a problem in some of the books, but considers them worthwhile all the same because the authors do “also have something valuable and original to say.” What valuable and original things they say, and valuable to whom, the reader is evidently supposed to guess. Besides, racism, in his view, “has been a devastatingly powerful force in shaping Africa and there may be something to be learned from its different varieties.” Be this as it may, I argue that the fact that some of these books were written by unrepentant racists means that no clear and positive image of Africa can emerge. The second

weakness with his selection system that Wisner is cautious about is the fact that there are many other books that deserved inclusion but are unknown to him. True. There are “many excellent writers” that he is ignorant about, writers “who write in one of the hundreds of indigenous African languages, not to mention French, Portuguese, or Arabic.” But no one would expect him, or anybody else for that matter, to know all African writers and their works, or every single work about any one African country.

To be fair, the book is not a complete failure. Although the reviews are very brief and rather simplistic, and the quotations from the books at the end of each review serve very little, if any, purpose, the volume could function as a passable starting point for beginners wishing to know about literary works from and about different African countries. The list of suggestions for further reading is perhaps the most helpful contribution in this regard, especially for literary scholars or other interested readers. This notwithstanding, the book’s significant weakness and half-truths make me wonder whether it would have been published had it been written by an African? For a publisher whose stated aim is to “publish work from some of the most imaginative and clear-thinking minds of our time”, what was Jacana’s motive for issuing a book of such ambiguous value?

Enough about *A Basket of Leaves*, a volume compiled by an overly enthusiastic would-be Africanist expert. Let me now turn to *Jungfrau*, a short story anthology whose stories were selected by ‘experts’ in the field of African literature. Does this anthology fare any better in showcasing Africa’s creative talent than *A Basket of Leaves*? To what extent can *Jungfrau* be considered representative of the “creative spirit” of Africa? Where do the anthology’s strengths

and weaknesses lie?

The seventh collection of short stories of The Caine Prize for African Writing, titled *Jungfrau and Other Short Stories*, carries seventeen stories from fifteen authors. The first five include the winning short story of the Caine Prize 2006 (“Jungfrau,” the title story of the collection) by Mary Watson, plus the other four shortlisted submissions by writers from places as far apart as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Morocco.

The remaining twelve short stories are products of a Ctel Caine Prize African Writers’ Workshop that was held at Crater Lake near Naivasha in Kenya. Like the Caine Prize stories, the workshop stories represent writers from different parts of Africa: North to South, East to West. For reasons that are not clear to me, two East African and two Southern African countries dominate representation in the collection. There are four stories from Kenya and two from Uganda, and seven stories from Southern Africa (five from South Africa, with Mary Watson and Darrel Bristow-Bovey contributing two stories each, and two from Zimbabwe). Is this because Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe have the greatest number of Caine Prize entrants or the best short story writers on the continent? Whatever the case might be, there seems to exist a need to correct the imbalance of representation by country in literary anthologies of African writing, a problem which seems to continue unchecked. While it is impossible to have writers from all countries in Africa represented in a collection of this nature, multiple voices from far flung corners of the continent would give us more of the multifarious experiences the continent offers.

Given the fact that the Caine Prize claims to represent the best writers across Africa (the blurb does not shy away from claiming that much), it would not seem unreasonable to expect the best from *Jungfrau*. Besides, being a collection that carries stories from different writers, one might also expect a diversity of themes, styles or approaches to the genre. The collection does not disappoint in this regard: it contains short stories that reveal various life experiences in Africa (good and bad: the ups and downs of life in postcolonial states), as well as African writers' mastery of the short story genre. Most of the stories touch on pertinent issues in Africa today.

Mary Watson's deservedly winning story ("Jungfrau" – maiden/virgin) earned praise from the Caine Prize judges' Chair, Dr. Nana Wilson-Tagoe, who rightly considers it, "a powerfully written narrative that works skilfully through a child's imagination to suggest a world of insights about familial and social relationships in the new South Africa". The story clearly shows the disparity between appearance and reality, between what people claim to be and what they really are.

In "The Last Trip" Sefi Atta tackles the problem of drug peddling and trafficking that affects many countries in Africa today, although the story focuses on her home country, Nigeria. It's possible that Atta had in mind the case of the Nollywood star Hassanat Taiwo Akinwande who fell from grace after being arrested for trying to smuggle into the UK "92 wraps of high-quality cocaine" that she had swallowed. Africa's legendary poverty and destitution, and sometimes sheer greed, have led some Africans to act as middlemen and carriers for international drug barons in drug syndicates involving several countries and continents. Some of these drugs are consumed right within the African continent; in coun-

tries such as South Africa the problem of drug abuse has reached epic proportions. Atta's story therefore touches an issue that is of great concern across the continent.

Darrel Bristow-Bovey dramatises the sense of insecurity felt by many Johannesburg residents as a result of violent crime in his "A Joburg Story". The prevalence of violent crime, which induces a sense of insecurity in the majority of citizens, is a burning issue in South Africa today. As is the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the subject of Elizabeth Pienaar's ironically titled story "Rejoice". In this work Pienaar addresses the twin issues of denialism and misconceptions about HIV and AIDS that have led many victims of the HI virus to premature graves. The narrative presents an illegal immigrant from Zimbabwe who, on developing full-blown AIDS suspects that he has been cursed by someone who is jealous of his big house. He refuses to go to hospital, despite his employer's insistence that he should. He later returns home to Zimbabwe where he succumbs to death, which could have been postponed had African belief systems not clashed so violently with Western science on HIV and AIDS. Until recently denialism characterised the South African government's position on HIV/AIDS: an infamous insistence that HIV does not cause AIDS. The government saw AIDS as a result of poverty and poor nutrition rather than a virus; a position that had dire consequences for the lives of victims of the virus.

The consequences of failed leadership in postcolonial Zimbabwe are the subject of Tinashe Mushakavanhu's "Postcards", which, true to the title, is in postcard style. While some citizens stay home to face rising poverty and hunger, those who manage to escape into exile have their black racial identity

thrust into their faces as they are forced to endure racialism and individualism in western host countries.

No doubt the writers of these stories, and others represented in the collection, tell tales that are of great concern in many countries in today's Africa. However, it is important to bear in mind that some of the narratives are very specific to the writer's particular countries, and to guard against the temptation to regard any one writer as a spokesperson for Africa. Africa is a large continent, and it is dangerous to assume that a problem identified in one country or region affects the whole continent.

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The standard of the contributions to *Jungfrau* leaves no doubt that the Caine Prize and the sponsors of the 2006 and 2007 Celtel Caine Prize African Writers Workshops are playing an important role in encouraging writing in Anglophone Africa, thereby helping to take African writing to new and greater heights. The annual collections of stories selected from the Caine Prize that have been published so far have helped showcase the quality of writing from the continent, and allowed African writers to tell their stories to a wider audience.

The downside of these publications, though, is the continued over-representation of some countries, and the resulting silence from others, usually the poorest on the continent. The anthologisation of the results of the competition, along with output from the workshop, infers that the selection is based on quality of writing across Africa. In fact the selection may very well be strongly influenced by the fact

that the organisers of the Cain Prize African Writers' Workshop and the business interests of Celtel, co-sponsors of the event, for three successive years saw Crater Lake in Kenya as a perfect venue for the event. Arguably the continued privileging of writers from certain countries where access to opportunities is easier as producers of the best, and therefore canonical, literature in Africa should be addressed.

The two publications discussed here share one thing in common: the claim to showcase stories from and about Africa. The one carries 99 books from and about Africa, while the other has seventeen stories written by Africans from eight countries. The quality and content of the former reveals that it claims more than it can offer, while the dominance of some countries in the latter paints a rather skewed picture of the quality of short story writing and publishing on the continent.

Surely it should be possible to select and ultimately canonise the continent's literature in a more equitable and representative manner?