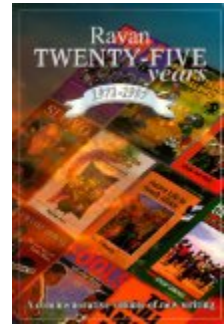


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

G.E. de Villiers, ed. *Ravan Twenty-five Years (1972-1997): A Commemorative Volume of New Writing*. Randburg: Ravan Press, 1997. 176 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86975-496-2.

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## Twenty-Five Years of Politically Committed Publishing in South Africa. And Then . . . ?

Billed as a “commemorative volume of new writing,” *Ravan Twenty-Five Years* makes remarkably gripping reading. It provides both the story of Ravan Press’s first twenty-five years of publishing in South Africa, and a range of new stories and poems of a consistently high caliber by writers such as J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Mongane Wally Serote. Typical of post-apartheid ambivalence, however, it leaves one wondering whether the collection commemorates a thing dead, or whether it celebrates continued success.

While Ravan’s determined resistance to apartheid from 1972 on justifies Lionel Abrahams’s description of the press as having had a “unique and tremendously significant history” (1), the rather lame general introduction by current supremo G.E. de Villiers suggests that in its very precarious present position as a subsidiary of Hodder and Stoughton any future contributions will be a great deal more tentative. As Tony Morphet commented in 1996 when it looked as if Ravan would vanish completely, “Big capital, long-term planning and strict accounting have taken the place of hunch, energy and networking.”[1]

Just as private houses in South African literature can frequently be read as allegorical representations of living conditions in South Africa generally, perhaps the decline (and likely fall) of Ravan’s publishing house can be read as an allegorical representation of the relative importance of economics and political commitment in contemporary South African cultural production. Indeed, Peter Randall, one of the house’s founding trustees (whose

name provided the “Ra” of “Ravan,” with the “va” and “n” coming from co-founders Danie van Zyl and Beyers Naude) describes the “intense idealism” behind Ravan’s birth as likely to “seem somewhat quaint”(2) under present circumstances.

Randall’s contribution was far from quaint, however, as we learn from his own brief memoir and from Glenn Moss who took over the reins in 1988. Between Randall’s and Moss’s management Mike Kirkwood had radicalized the press, shifting it toward openly political aims rather than operating under the ecclesiastical banner of the original sponsors, the Christian Institute and Spro-Cas (the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society). Regrettably, we don’t have Kirkwood’s own account of his turbulent years at the press, which saw the disastrous restructuring of Ravan’s day-to-day governing body as a “staff collective” (19).

This omission is regrettable because, as Tony Morphet sees it, it was Kirkwood who brought with him from the little literary magazine *Bolt* three big ideas: that Ravan could provide an outlet for a “surge of writing in the black townships”; that Ravan could promote the work of “maverick academics, especially the Marxist historians, [who] not only had great things to say about the country, but also made for better reading than most novels”; and that Ravan could entice into print a “whole lot of intelligent people who could be writers if they are just shown how” (Morphet). One of the most visible consequences of the Kirkwood period was the emergence of *Staffrider* as THE literary and cultural

magazine of importance in the post-1976 period. Fortunately we do already have a Kirkwood retrospective on at least that branch of Ravan's work in his prefatory "Remembering Staffrider" in the 1988 collection *Ten Years of Staffrider* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1988). In that article Kirkwood presents the kind of populist and popular challenge that contemporary economic conditions and political will in South Africa have prevented from being taken up, namely "to develop a relationship between writer and community such that the writer's 'we' is authenticated by other processes than those deriving from the political framework within which, nevertheless, the writer and the community first recognise each other" (Kirkwood 5). What I am suggesting is that, with continued funding (and there's the rub, of course), Ravan was uniquely placed to continue the democratization process that so enlivened South African literature and historiography after 1976. Historian Albert Grundlingh points to a corollary in his contribution to the current volume "Publishing the Past: Ravan Press and Historical Writing"; he comments on the irony that the new state "which was able to draw considerable strengths from the past in its fight against apartheid" has significantly scaled down history requirements for school curricula, which might have provided both commercial bread-and-butter for Ravan Press and the opportunity for cultural blossoming of the ideas "seeded by Ravan history texts" (32).

If Ravan had a truly radical impact on South African historiography, it had a no less significant impact in the field of literature. Ravan published the poetry of Wopko Jensma, the first novels of J.M. Coetzee, Miriam Tlali and others, and, particularly through the medium of *Staffrider* "released the enormous well of angry yet creative energies bottled up in South Africa's townships" (p.15).

In reading the literary selections in this book, again one's sense of celebration for Ravan's 25 years is tempered by a sense of things having gone off the boil to some extent. Editor de Villiers has included no biographical details on the writers as they "are so well known that no introduction seemed necessary" ("Introduction" n.p.), and indeed with contributions from Coetzee, Ahmed Essop, Stephen Gray, Serote, Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, and Gordimer, one can see perhaps see his point, but it also seems like a disappointing resting on laurels or established brand-names, and this reader at least hankered after some of the raw energy of the *Staffrider* ethos, evidence that Ravan authors are not just writing ABOUT post-apartheid South Africa but writing it into existence in the truly democratic, demotic ways that at

least seemed possible in the '80s.

Which is not to say that the stories aren't a treat. They are. There are some individual gems, and together they draw a fascinating composite picture of contemporary South Africa (mainly, it must be said, from white perspectives). Christopher Hope's "St. Francis in the Veld" takes H.C. Bosman-esque risks with political incorrectness, conjuring up the ludicrous Tookie De Tromp whose saintliness consists of erecting a "cathedral of gray towers" (75) on the veld, outhouses for itinerant farm-workers who clog them up with stones as soon as they are built. In its bluster-busting humor, Hope's story provides a measure of optimism to temper his satire. There are similar optimistic, reconciliatory tones in Lionel Abrahams's "Enemy," Stephen Gray's gay "A True Romance," and Peter Wilhelm's "The Man Who Had Everything." Wilhelm creates a character whose pedigree might be by Ezekiel Mphahlele out of Nadine Gordimer—someone who might be Mrs. Plum's ex-husband in the '90s; Mike O'Riordan's post-election depression gradually vanishes as he becomes a part of the "village" (82) of his compound, the walls of which become "perhaps a memorial for something which had happened so long ago that the reason for the sagging brickwork . . . had been forgotten" (83).

Ahmed Essop adopts a fabular style in "The Banquet," similar to Wilhelm's but with a minatory twist, pointing out the rapidity of post-apartheid corruption. Other reminders of the great challenges South Africa faces come from Serote and Gordimer, while Rose Moss contributes a complicated, tightly crafted story "A Gem Squash" which manages to convey both the deforming narrowness of anti-apartheid moralism, and a sense of the continuing necessity in a world without ideology (she sets the story in the United States) to care and act for social justice. Moss's story poses the question of how to balance the "moral choice" with the "wise choice [which] must acknowledge the nature of things" (123). Does the normalization of South Africa justify the abandonment of political commitment? One would hope that, given their history, Ravan Press and its influential writers can continue to find a way to combine commercial viability with political credibility.

#### Note

[1]. Tony Morphet. "Ravan: Child of a Special Time." *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 1 November to 7 November, 1996. (Available at <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/art/rvravan.html>.)

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