

**Ondjaki.** *Granma Nineteen and the Soviet's Secret*. Translated by Stephen Henighan. Biblioasis International Translation Series. Windsor: Biblioasis, 2014. 192 pp. \$15.95, paperback, ISBN 978-1-927428-65-8.



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This latest novel to appear in English bears similarities with Ondjaki's *Good Morning Comrades* (2008), also translated by Stephen Henighan, in that its major protagonists and instigators of change are a group of children. The novel revolves around the lives of the residents of Bishop's Beach, an area of Luanda, and their relations with a group of Soviet service personnel who are responsible for the building of a mausoleum and monument nearby to the founding president of Angola. The rumour begins to circulate that the inhabitants of the area are going to be moved away to a new housing development far out of town and their homes dynamited as part of the mausoleum project. Three children--the narrator; Pinduca, known as Pi or more commonly 3.14; and Charlita, the daughter of the local bar owner--prepare to save their area from destruction by entering the building site under cover of darkness and blowing up the monument before the explosives are used on their own homes. As in Ondjaki's other novels, there is a panoply of picturesque and comic characters, but the two

adults who engage the reader's interest in particular, because of the potential for romantic entanglement, are the narrator's grandmother, Agnette, the Granma Nineteen of the novel's title, and her lovelorn admirer, Comrade Bilhardov, the Soviet of the title, who is in charge of the construction site.

The novel falls well within a genre of comic, satirical fiction rooted in Luanda that harks back to the stories and novels of Luandino Vieira, and more recently to the work of Manuel Rui, in particular this author's prize-winning novella of the early 1980s, *Quem Me Dera Ser Onda*, which, like Ondjaki's later novel, pokes fun, through the comments and actions of its heroic child protagonists, at some of the institutions of the one-party state, among these its blinkered press and radio. Not surprisingly, the older author makes a cameo appearance in *Granma Nineteen* in the form of Uncle Rui, the writer, seen riding past on his bicycle. The fundamental difference between Ondjaki and his older contemporaries is that while Vieira and Rui participated in the struggle for independence

against Portugal, and were active in the MPLA government when Angola became independent in 1975, Ondjaki was only born in 1977, and therefore belongs to a generation that has no tangible memory of colonial rule or of the nationalist struggle, and that went through school during the so-called revolutionary years of the 1980s. The Russians and Cubans who appear in his stories are seen through the eyes of children, those of Ondjaki's generation. The Western media during those years tended to focus on the political motives behind the presence of the Eastern Bloc and its citizens in countries like Angola, and almost never on the human face of their involvement. Ondjaki, on the other hand, invests his characters with a humanity based on their personal strengths and vulnerabilities. These include all the issues associated with exile. Bilhardov feels the absence of family and talks nostalgically of the snow in his home country, as he and his colleagues sweat in uniforms unsuited to Luanda's heat and humidity. He is alienated, in part, by his imperfect knowledge of Portuguese, which the children soon notice, giving him the nickname of Gudafterov because of the way he pronounces "good afternoon" in Portuguese. There is also the Cuban doctor, Rafael KnockKnock, a nickname given him by his patients because of the way he knocks on doors when carrying out home visits. It is the doctor who puts *Granma Nineteen* at ease by dancing a tango with her at the hospital prior to amputating her gangrenous toe.

In this novel, Ondjaki gives us a fascinating glimpse into a brief but seemingly forgotten period of Angola's recent history, namely the fifteen years when the country's regime was bolstered by the Soviet Union and its allies against Western and South African-backed insurgents. The Bishop's Beach of Ondjaki's child heroes is a place where the locals devise simple ways of keeping their place in the perennial bread queue, where there are electricity shortages, where the local gas station has long ago run out of petrol, and where the term "comrade" is the default mode of ad-

dress. Since the eventual end of that war in 2002, the country, with the exception of its governing party, which still rules, has changed beyond all recognition, thanks to ever increasing disparities in wealth fueled by the boom in oil and diamonds, and by widescale corruption among its political and social elite, not to mention the exponential growth of its capital into a vast, sprawling, traffic-choked megacity. Russian and Cuban personnel have been replaced by American, western European, Brazilian, and Chinese business executives, technicians, and workers in the petroleum industry. Angola has been fully incorporated into the global economy. Neto's Mausoleum now dominates Luanda's coastline. It never was blown up in a blaze of color by a group of children, as happened in Ondjaki's novel. Whether the final scene of *Granma Nineteen* is an act of destruction or nothing more than a magnificent firework display, it is, nevertheless, an expression of public defiance against an authoritarian state. The author's childhood city is a lost paradise, in which the coherence of a community, with help from its children and a lovesick Russian, might well have overcome the arrogant aims of a beleaguered regime seeking to consolidate its influence on the minds and lives of ordinary Angolans by erecting a symbol of its prepotency in their midst.

Translating Ondjaki is not an easy task. The narrative in this novel is fast-moving and colloquial, though peppered with some lyrical evocations of the ever-present sea and the changing colors cast upon it by the tropical light. The dialogues are sparky and witty. In addition to the conversations between the child protagonists, there are occasional interventions in Spanish from the Cuban doctor and the beach-coming Angolan, Sea Foam, who studied in Cuba and who happily speaks a brand of "portunhol" (Portuguese mixed with Spanish). Finally, there is of course, the picturesque Portuguese of the Russians. Stephen Henighan has done an excellent job of conveying

the narrative qualities and wit of the original in his English translation.

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