

The Botswana Writer, Unity Dow

The Right to say Whatever I Like

Helen Fallon

The goodness of the year was always gauged by the health of the children – visible rib cages would bring chucks of concern from the mothers and sad shakes of heads from the fathers”, Unity Dow, author of *Juggling Truths* and Botswana’s first female high court judge, writing about the village of Mochudi, in the British Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), where she grew up.

Dow’s novel tells the story of Monei Ntuka, a girl from a closely-knit semi-nomadic village community. Beyond the village is farmland, where maize, millet, watermelons and beans are grown. Beyond that is “the land of men and boys, where the cattle were kept and boys learnt to be men and men lived quietly missing their women and daughters.”

OLD AND NEW

Traditional beliefs co-exist peacefully with Christianity. Monei’s grandmother retains many of the beliefs and customs of her ancestors but regularly attends both the Dutch Reformed and Catholic churches. Family and respect for the elders are all important and Monei wonders about Jesus’ attitude to his parents: “Wasn’t it rather rude for him to answer his own mother as he reportedly did. ‘Why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?’ I could not imagine responding like that to my parents. I also wondered and was rather unhappy about the absence of any black angels.”

At the age of seven Monei starts school. “My life then became split into two realities and it seemed they were not complementary. Often I felt I lived two sets of lives, the school life and the home life. The home life itself was divided into two, that is the village life and the land life. It did not help that we moved between village,

lands and cattle post, depending on the season and whether school was on or off.”

She encounters a “constant shifting and restlessness, and what I learned at school did not seem to have any real life application.” Rra-Bina, a village man, wonders about the value of sending children to school: “these things the children are learning, they are English things. They are strange things. They don’t learn about the things you and I see and can touch.”

This feeling of school being somehow removed from their real world echoes the experience of the young girl, Mosa, in Unity Dow’s first novel *Far and Beyond*. When asked by a white teacher to write an essay about her family, she finds herself in a dilemma.

“Her mother would be very surprised to learn that she was describing Koki in her composition as a distant cousin. But Mrs Valkey, not her mother, would be grading the composition. She just had to keep the two lives apart to avoid bad marks on the one hand and resentment on the other. Sometimes she felt that even a simple question such as ‘How many sisters do you have?’ was not easy to answer.”

In *Juggling Truths*, proud of the education his daughter is getting, Monei’s father, Tsietsi, asks for her help. “I want to sign my name, not thumb-point the form, when I receive money from your brother at the mine.” In order to remember how to write his name Tsietsi “decided that the T looked like the cross on which Jesus was nailed, s a snake, l a finger and e an eye. Then by the end of the month all he had to do was whisper to himself Jesus, snake, finger, eye, Jesus, snake, finger.”

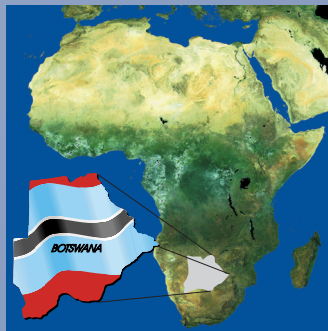


TRAGEDY'S SHADOW

The community is not totally sheltered from the outside world. Income remittances are an important part of the economy and each December “young men, donning the latest style hats and strutting like proud cockerels, would arrive from the gold mines in South Africa.”

Monei's sister goes to work for an Afrikaner family in South Africa and returns pregnant by the owner of the house. Tsietsi agonises over this, wondering “how could he raise a Dutch child after the bad things the Boers had done to his tribe over the years? Now he had a Boer for a grandchild. A coloured grandchild. How could he learn to love her?” But very quickly he accepts the child, who becomes a family favourite.

Far and Beyon', published in 2002, opens with a funeral. Mara, a village woman, is burying her son, the second of her children to die during the year. Convinced someone has put a curse on her family, she turns to witchcraft and traditional magic. Her two surviving teenage children, Stan and Mosa, attend school and know that both brothers died from Aids, not witchcraft.



BOTSWANA

Because of its mineral wealth, particularly diamonds, Botswana, with a population of one and a half million and Gaborone as capital, is relatively wealthy. Though the Kalahari Desert dominates the

landscape in the west and southwest, and droughts are frequent, the rest of the country enjoys a subtropical climate.

Writers tend to like the country and its people. Bessie Head (the subject of Helen Fallon's July/August 2004 article), a victim of apartheid in her home country, went to Botswana: “In South Africa, all my life I lived in shattered little bits. All those shattered bits began to grow together here.” And Alexander McCall Smith has recently written a really charming series of novels set in Botswana and featuring the inimitable Mma Precious Ramotswe and her No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency.

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.
She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone.

Far and Beyon' is published by Aunt Luke Books and *Juggling Truths* is published by Spinifex Press Pty Ltd.



Unity Dow was the first woman to be appointed to the High Court in Botswana. Previously, as a human rights advocate and lawyer, she successfully challenged Botswana's nationality laws on the grounds that they discriminated against women.

Photos: spinifexpress.com.au

Talking about this novel, Dow said “I really could not have written a contemporary novel on Botswana without devoting a major part of it to Aids. If I invite guests to dinner, I can expect at least one to cancel at short notice because of a funeral or illness to attend to...We say you are either infected or affected.” According to recent UN figures, at least one in five adults in Botswana is HIV positive or has Aids.

TELLING IT AS IT IS

Unity Dow's parents placed a high value on education and Dow studied law in Botswana, Swaziland and Edinburgh University. Her husband is from the United States.

In 1995 she challenged the Botswana government regarding its 1982 Citizenship Act, which decrees that Botswana women married to foreigners cannot pass on their nationality to their children, though Botswana men married to foreigners can. She won her case. In 1998, she became Botswana's first female High Court judge.

Writing novels, she says, allows her to make political statements: “as a judge, every time I open my mouth, I have to watch what I say. In fiction, I have the right to say whatever I like.” ■