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Without a Name by Yvonne Vera

Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith

University of Nebraska at Omaha, pamelasmith@unomaha.edu

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WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW: ZIMBABWE

Yvonne Vera. *Without a Name*. Toronto/Harare. TSAR/ Baobab (African Books Collective, distr.). 1995/1994. 103 pages. Can\$12.95/4.95/\$8.50. ISBN 0-920661-54-8/ 0-908311-78-8.

A relative newcomer to the literary scene, Yvonne Vera joins the rising ranks of Zimbabwean writers and African women writers, earning her place with promising credentials, academic and literary. Vera is the author of two previous works, a volume of short stories, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), and a poetic novel, *Nehanda* (1993; see *WLT* 69:1, p. 212), which were shortlisted for the Regional Commonwealth Writers Award in 1993 and 1994 respectively. A third publication, *Without a Name*, followed in 1994, also shortlisted for a Regional Commonwealth Prize for best work of fiction in 1994 and named First-Prize Winner of the Zimbabwe Book Publishers Association annual literary awards. These achievements, all within a three-year period, indicate the artistic talent and the potential to prolificity of this rising young writer.

A gripping and compelling novel written in poetic prose, *Without a Name* is the story of one woman's endurance and survival in war-torn Zimbabwe. The year is 1977. Set in the historical context of preindependence Zimbabwe, against a backdrop of insensitive colonialism and the guerrilla warfare to unseat it, the novel paints the picture of the dispossession of native Zimbabweans and their struggle to maintain faith in the land, its dreams, and its inclusive histories of the people.

Mazvita, a strong, freedom-loving, but naive woman, seeks refuge in the city. Leaving her rural Mubaira and the security of Ndenyedzi's love because she no longer believes in the promise of the land, Mazvita sets out on a journey of dreams, searching for liberation and new beginnings. The land, poisoned by acts of war, becomes maleficent. Instead of the freedom and refuge she seeks in the city, away from the land which seems to have forgotten its people because "it dreams new dreams for itself," Harare offers its own horrors and perils, its own warfare, unleashing false hope too readily, too soon.

The "journey" itself is portentous, fraught with the burden of fear--with the reality of rape and the dangerous search for "new dreams to replace . . . ancient claim(s)" in a city where one cannot even trust one's shadow, in a city where "death, properly executed, could be mistaken for progress." Pregnant upon arrival, burdened with motherhood and dreams unrealized seven months later, and her fate in disarray, Mazvita murders her

unnamed child--Ndenyedzi's offspring--in a moment of despair and madness, mistaking her resolve for kindness. Sine "she knew about departures because she had mistaken them for beginnings," her passion for beginnings yields a sour harvest; her lack of patience and hope results in nightmarish dreams. Freedom becomes undefinable, unattainable, when new, shallow dreams are sought to replace ancient claims promised by the land which "defines . . . unifies." But it is 1977. Mazvita returns to Mubaira, the place of her beginning, broken and brutalized, to bury her child.

Vera's style is terse, poetic, almost academic; her metaphorical language suggestive, suspenseful, compelling. Her audience is clearly restrictively Western-oriented in the sense that *Without a Name* does not readily show strains of the oral tradition. Thirty-three one- and two-page chapters--the longest runs five pages--of terse but dense, poetic, image-laden language depict rather than tell about anguish, poverty, and suffering. The repetition of the year 1977 looms large and is evocative. A fine work of fiction indeed.

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By Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith, University of Nebraska, Omaha

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