

Can We Talk. by Shimmer Chinodya. Heinemann, 2000. 154 pp.

Shimmer Chinodya like so many African writers is a person of many talents and professions. Aside from writing five novels, winning the Commonwealth Prize for *Harvest of Thorns* (1990), receiving a Caine nomination for *Can We Talk* (2000), and authoring several children's books, he has taught creative writing at St. Lawrence University in New York (1995-1997), written and edited films, and worked in the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe. His most recent collection of short stories, *Can We Talk*, a coming of age anthology, is a carefully crafted synthesis of writing about young people. Nuanced, graceful, and imaginative, Chinodya leads readers into conversations about issues of politics, gender, class, religion, and kinship. His strength lies in the direct, seemingly unedited experiences he chooses to discuss: a child's confusion, a boy's fear of death, an adolescent's humiliation, and a student's fear of intimacy. As Chinodya writes about slightly older males, his focus moves on to a suitor's awkwardness, a bureaucrat's womanizing, an alienated son's neglect of family, and an artist's apology to his wife for his self-indulgence.

Among these stories are examples of many different storytelling techniques. Chinodya's writing craft changes as much as do the stories themselves. From the short, face-paced, jerky phrases which reflect the child-like perceptions in "Hoffman Street" to the epistolary form of a selfish, lonely artist-husband in "Can We Talk," Chinodya experiments with language. Refreshingly without artifice, he reminds readers of the value of direct communication and that we are ultimately social beings. As the artist learns, "Whatever it is inside me-love, lust, hatred, imagination-it needs to be shared because there is too much of it for me or for me and you alone" (143). Moreover, developing social awareness involves learning "about tenderness and imagination and simplicity and about how we are wasting our lives in squabbling and silence and competition" (144). These sorts of insights suggest that Chinodya has something valuable to discuss with readers, particularly if they participate in his lively conversations.

The potential audience for this text is as varied as are the stories. For sociologists, anthropologists, and historians many of these stories offer fictional accounts of contemporary realities about gender, class, and ethnicity. "Among the Dead" is not only a story about funeral rites but a comment on the racial divide between a white teacher and his precocious black student and is embedded in a broader discussion of Zimbabwean geography, history, and politics. For botanists or political scientists, other stories have disciplinary currency. "The Man Who Hanged Himself" is full of indigenous social practices in the Matroko Bush, where Mapostori gather, pafa trees grow, and a man has hanged himself. For Africanists interested in preserving language, Chinodya writes in a style that requires readers to confront non-English. Most stories are told artfully with Shona words sprinkled throughout. Appropriately, the author has provided a glossary of Shona words. On the one hand, mature and learned readers may find Chinodya's fiction beneficial for his knowledge and appreciation of Zimbabwe's history, society and culture.

On the other hand, younger audiences may enjoy Chinodya's fiction for his creative perceptions and his careful representation of Zimbabwe's youth, particularly males.

Before concluding this review, a word must be said about three stories that merit special attention: "Going to See Mr B.V.," "Bramson," and "Strays." Each of these stories deals with social class issues, which suggests the author's deep concern for humane interaction among individuals, and represents an appeal for reducing social stratification and tension. "Going to See Mr. B.V." is a story about the humiliation that pride of class and ethnicity can stir up. "Bramson" is a cautionary tale of rejecting older kin and trusting strangers. And, "Strays," perhaps Chinodya's best story, examines how humans treat their animals, whether an African, European, or African suburban dog. He describes their difference brilliantly,

The average African dog is a creature to be killed, scolded, and have missiles thrown at it—an inconvenient extra mouth that threaten precious supplies in seasons of drought . . . (82)

A European dog is more than a dog. (And European—even in these post-colonial times—is understood to mean white people as well as that small but resolute class of blacks who have padded their way up the social ladder with wads of money). . . it is a member of the family with a personality, name, a kennel, a veterinary-aid card, and, of course, a budget." (83).

A suburban African dog in an aspiring, middle-class household is something between the two. While it probably benefits from the example of its white neighbors, it remains a household appendage. (83)

A bitter social critique, Chinodya is able to comment on the inability of the dog, Sango, and his owner, Sam, to admit that they need friendship and love. Both of them, alienated, constrained, and suspicious, see themselves chased into self-destruction. Unable to come to terms with their environment, Sam, like the dog, is a stray, out of place in his own home. Readers will find the commentary on dogs, indicative of Chinodya's best insights.

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