

largely positive ("caring ... a fine work and a superbly nostalgic experience" (133)), while foregrounding the "layer of transgressive sparkle" under the words and actions of **Mary Renault** and her lifelong consort, Julie Mullard, which he feels Sweetman has missed. He also corrects some names (such as Heinrich Verwoerd), which Sweetman gets wrong. Gray's regard for Renault ("Likeable. Real. Teaching us not to cheat" (131)) is everywhere evident, and is based on her uncompromising standards as a historian and researcher who asked that her epitaph should read "She got it right".

The next chapter, on Siphso Sepamla, presents a carefully considered account of the "Soweto Poets". Gray moves through Sepamla's childhood – the family background with a domestic worker mother and a teacher-turned-miner father – to Sepamla's apartheid-dictated career as a schoolteacher, to his early theatre writing, to his best-known poetry in *To whom it may concern*. Detailing the political indignities suffered by Sepamla under apartheid – the fact that he received a passport for the first time in 1980 and that *The Soweto I love* remained banned until 1986 – Gray outlines Sepamla's preoccupations as set out in "The black writer in South Africa today: problems and dilemmas" (1975) and in his two collections *Hurry up to it* (1975) and *The blues is you in me* (1976), before detailing his only personal contact with Sepamla, an interview conducted in June 1977. Commenting on the success of *A ride on the whirlwind* (1981), which has been translated into French, German and Italian, Gray cites the awards recently offered to Sepamla by the French government and the Woza Afrika Foundation. He ends the chapter with Sepamla's rousing manifesto: "An artist is the conscience of any nation. He should be free of party politics, he should be free to criticise politicians" (156). Always politically aware, the Sepamla essay nevertheless stands out from the other pieces in this collection by its lack of personal anecdote. It eloquently demonstrates what writers like Gray have often deplored in print: the almost unbridgeable gap between the experiences of black South Africans under apartheid and the cultural privilege of their white peers.

The concluding chapter on Richard Rive has a very different feel. Though the barbarities of apartheid impinge as grossly on Rive's as Sepamla's life, this is nevertheless a chapter about literary friendships – *inter alia* with Jack Cope, Uys Krige, Jan Rabie and Marjorie Wallace of *Contrast*, and with Gray's and Rive's publishers, David and Marie Philips. Gray and Rive share many encounters, from embattled classrooms during the 1976 riots to posh restaurants where Rive gourmandizes and Gray pays, to diving into the Indian Ocean rollers at Onrust in search of Uys's false teeth, bashed out by the thundering surf. Framed though it is by the tragedy of Rive's untimely death, the chapter contains some of Gray's funniest anecdotes. My favourites are Rive's reply to "that old racist battleaxe" Sarah Gertrude Millin, author of the eugenicist *God's stepchildren*:

When the colour-bar dowager encountered this upstart [Rive in his brilliant twenties] she was evidently struck with genealogical confusion. All she could blurt was: "What are you, Indian?" To which Richard suavely replied: "No, ma'am, I am your step-child." (158)

There is also the story of Cecil Skotnes carving panels depicting scenes from Schreiner's *Story of an African farm* on the front doors of Richard's Heathfield villa. This occasioned a visiting Belgian scholar to remark in bewilderment: "But, Richard, in Europe only cathedrals have carved doors" (174). All in all the picture that emerges of "funny, kind, impossible Richard" (158) is of a figure of great talent and integrity, remembered unsentimentally by a close friend.

Craig Mackenzie's original, scholarly yet always accessible *The oral-style South African short story in English: AW Drayson to HC Bosman* takes as its point of departure the fact that "writing (hence written literature) was preceded by many thousands of years of cultural life rooted in oral discourse"(1). He explains that this book is not concerned with what Walter Ong calls "primary oral cultures" (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) but rather with *orality as a literary device*. This trope dates back to Boccaccio and Chaucer, where "the reader can pretend to be one of the listening company"(1).

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30 REVIEW ESSAYS

Review Essay
by Gail Fincham
"Writing Lives +
Letters"

Why is the strategy of employing fictional narrators who “tell” their stories to an implied audience so popular in South African fiction from the middle of the nineteenth century? Looking at the short stories in English of nine South African writers – Drayson, Scully, Fitzgerald, Glanville, Gibbon, Slater, Smith, Blignaut and finally Bosman – Mackenzie remarks that “the stories of these writers exemplify a significant – and largely unexplored – narrational tendency: they all adopt, in various ways and in varying degrees, ‘an oral style’ ” (3).

A key feature of “oral style” is the creation of a fictional narrator through whose speaking voice the story is mediated. Here Mackenzie draws on the work of the Russian Formalist Boris Eichenbaum, who uses the term *skaz* to describe literature that has an orientation toward the oral form of narration. Eichenbaum defines *skaz* as

that form of narrative prose which, in its lexicon, syntax and selection of intonations, reveals an orientation toward the oral speech of a narrator [...] a form which fundamentally departs from written discourse and makes the narrator as such a real personage. (4)

As much a written or literary narrative as any other form of narrative, the *skaz* creates the illusion that we are hearing rather than reading a story because it foregrounds the narrating rather than the experiencing self. Inherently self-reflexive, *skaz* narratives – like modernist and post-modernist texts – thus introduce the dimension of metafictional play.

A further element of theoretical sophistication is added to the discussion of *skaz* narratives by Anne Banfield, who brings in the question of audience. The *skaz* narrator “addresses the tale to some audience whose presence is linguistically reflected in the tale itself” (6). Such fictional audiences, Mackenzie explains, are persons associated with the narrator – fellow travelers meeting around an evening campfire or fellow farmers meeting on a farm stoep or at the village post office. To the work of Eichenbaum and Banfield he adds Mikhail Bakhtin, whose distinction between monologic (single-voiced) and dialogic (double-voiced) narrative forms affords the *skaz* the possibilities of irony and parody.

Mackenzie deploys this Eichenbaum-Banfield-Bakhtin theoretical framework to distinguish, in South African oral-style stories, between “artless” and “artful” stories. The tales of the master-storyteller Herman Charles Bosman (in whom the oral-style story reaches its apogee), though ostensibly simple and artless, are quintessentially artful. Taking over the older genre of the fireside tale with its characteristics of intimacy and familiarity, Bosman introduces new elements of narrative economy and incisive social commentary, exploiting the potential for self-subversion latent in the works of his predecessors and “creating a complex set of relationships between author, narrator, internal audience, and readership” (144). Thus the Bosman chapter (entitled “The oral stylist *par excellence*”) is the most important in the book. Earlier chapters establish, in contradistinction to the metafictional artfulness of

Bosman’s stories, claims to “plain truth” and “authenticity” (in the stories of Drayson, Doyle, and Ingram), a characteristic Eurocentrism in the depiction of Africa (“the polarity European/African does not include the native inhabitants of Africa, who are therefore effectively denied a full human subjectivity” (30)), and, in relation to one of Ingram’s stories, an anthropologically striking attempt on the part of the authorial persona to “translate” from one language and culture into another, as though this project were unproblematic.

In the chapter on the late nineteenth-century stories of Scully and Fitzpatrick, Mackenzie notes some progression away from the cultural myopia of the earlier tales and a greater degree of narrative sophistication, reflected in “a more self-conscious aestheticism and ... the beginnings of ironic interplay between internal narrator and frame narrator” (52). Scully, unlike Drayson, “recognizes the integrity and importance of African culture in its own right” (54). Where the work of earlier short-story writers revealed a generic indeterminacy that suggested these writers’ struggle to find cohesive narrative modes to embody the “African experience”, both Scully and Fitzpatrick are consciously “telling tales”.

Chapter 4 considers Ernest Glanville’s achievement in incorporating humour and irony into the oral-style tale, thus inaugurating in the South African context what Bakhtin calls “parodistic *skaz*”, marked by the idiosyncratic nature of the storyteller’s verbal style. Glanville’s “Uncle