

## RESENSIES / REVIEWS

### **The Dassie and the Hunter. A South African Meeting.**

Jeff Opland. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. 2005. 389 pp.  
ISBN 1-86914-036-2.

This book does not resemble any of Jeff Opland's previous academic works. There is no similarity in style, and to some extent content. His previous books, namely, *Xhosa oral poetry: Aspects of a black South African tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), and *Xhosa poets and poetry* (David Philip, 1998), were written as purely scientific, academic works. *The Dassie and the Hunter* amounts to a subtle snub of academia and its restrictive rules. Though written by Opland, it is as if he and his research subject, Manisi, have colluded to make this work different and special, in a personal mystical way, disregarding academic etiquette, weaving a more creative, poetic tapestry. This makes the book an interesting read. In style and content, it is neither rigorously academic, solely biographical, nor purely creative. It evades classification. It is individualistic.

This book appropriately begins with a lament, in traditional Xhosa izibongo style, for the late poet, David Yali-Manisi. An English version appears in the front of the book, and an isiXhosa version appears on the last page. In between the versions of this lament, the reader is introduced to the complex and intertwined lives of Opland and Manisi. It has to be remembered that this was a time when apartheid discouraged cross-colour relationships from being formed. It is important that this context be

constantly borne in mind by the reader. This context informs the nature of the relationship between Opland and Manisi. Although portrayed by some in the book as stereotypical and having a baasskap mentality, their relationship, I believe, was genuine and exploratory.

The book has no chapters. It resembles more a collection of personal essays or sections, with each essay creatively titled. "The evil spirit of tribalism" introduces one to David Yali-Manisi. This is done against the backdrop of the life and work of the great isiXhosa poet, S.E.K. Mqhayi, in order to show how his work inspired and influenced that of David Manisi. Opland also refers to the history of the time, the emergence of the homelands, the later release of Mandela from prison and so on. The book takes one on a historical, personal and poetic journey. This makes the book challenging and complex for the reader. Throughout the book the author laments the fact that Manisi, on the eve of South Africa's liberation from apartheid, "lapsed into obscurity, and faded from view like a star swept by clouds" (27). Nevertheless, Opland manages to place Manisi back onto the centre stage of South African poetry. The book is clear evidence of the greatness of this South African poet.

The next essay, "That is a Thembu", traces Manisi's early poetic career. It also traces

his relationship with Kaizer Matanzima, who later became leader of “independent” Transkei. This section explains historically, how Manisi emerged as Matanzima’s praise singer. It also shows how their relationship was terminated due to political differences. One is also introduced to a Mr. Arosi who seems to have had a profound influence on the initial discovery of Manisi’s poetic talent. By the end of the book I was left feeling that this relationship could have been further researched and elucidated.

The third “essay”, “I do it on your behalf”, introduces Jeff Opland’s first meeting with Manisi. This section also contains exciting juxtapositions of their individual lives, the author in Cape Town, the poet in the rural Khundulu valley, miles apart.


“Yish goes the caterpillar” is perhaps the most controversial. Here Manisi is placed in artificial contexts by the author and asked to perform. The author later acknowledges that this was not the correct approach and that he “never again suggested to Manisi a topic of any of his oral poems (...) henceforth I merely accepted and celebrated his capacity to do so” (114).

The fifth essay “Let’s clasp each other’s hand”, explores the growing interdependent relationship between Opland and Manisi. An extended poem in honour of Transkei’s independence and Matanzima is introduced here. Given the ambivalent relationship between Manisi and Matanzima this poem is acknowledged by both Opland and Manisi as controversial, making the poet feel “ashamed” (149). Nevertheless, apartheid and Matanzima aside, it remains an important poem, depicting a certain era, and it should be seen in that context. One is introduced to the work of the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER, Rhodes University), which was later to become, dare I say, the “intellectual” home of both David Manisi and Jeff Opland.

The following essay, “I wish we could meet, and meet again” sees Manisi as a traditional artist in residence at the ISER. In a letter to Opland, Manisi acknowledges that, “it is the hunter who knows the dassies cran-nies” (206). This is reflected in the title of the book, encapsulating the allusive, yet co-dependent relationship between Opland and Manisi. The next section, “Reclaiming lost sticks”, sees Manisi appointed as a research officer at the ISER. This appointment facilitated the publication of much of his poetry.

The eighth section, “Everyone lies, but especially poets”, explores Manisi’s relationship with the University of Transkei, his appointment at the ISER having come to an end, as well as his journey to Vassar College in America, where he joins Opland in order to give a number of performances. Their relationship is received as stereotypical, causing much debate and controversy: “the work of a white man writing about black traditions” (271). As previously stated, the historical context of this relationship should not be ignored. I believe that the book shows the genuine intrigue, interest and well-being that exists between these individuals. Opland remains supportive of Manisi, even when dismissed from his employment for drunkenness. Opland, like a friend, chooses to support Manisi and his poetic talent, rather than the reasoning of the employer. Indeed, poetic genius or creative talent often succumbs to the need to survive, to earn money. It is seldom a happy and comfortable relationship. This is depicted in the life of Manisi.

The following section, “Ndiyindoda, I am a man”, further explores the American experience against the perceived American stereotypes of South Africans, as well as the hostility of black South Africans in America towards Manisi’s relationship with Opland. At another level, the tragic death of Manisi



si's second wife unfolds. Finally, "I have nothing to say", sees Mandela released from prison, David Manisi's growing infirmity and isolation. It also contains some recollections on his life and work by various individuals. Towards the end of the book the style grows increasingly prosaic and lyrical, much like Manisi's poetry: "In performance he came alive, he was freed of the constraints of social intercourse (...) what he said and the way that he said it demanded attention and marked him as a man of stature, a true son of the soil of Africa, and one of its greatest poets" (387).

I have not commented on any of the poetry presented in this book. It is for you, the reader to imbibe, critique and enjoy. As a scholar of isiXhosa I would have liked to see the presence of parallel isiXhosa texts.

Opland has chosen to ignore academic convention. There is no index, no bibliography or references. The lack of an index makes it difficult to cross-reference and relocate certain facts. That said, the style is refreshing, personal, if not self-indulgent at times, yet the book is striking and beautifully written. It is, for all intents and purposes a style, which takes into account Manisi's suspicion, disdain and distrust for academics, "he bore a wary distrust of their pretensions and technical jargon" (108).

*The Dassie and the Hunter* would appeal to anyone interested in South African literature, history and biography. A purely academic, scientific book – No! An innovative, creative, compelling, personal and exciting read – Yes!

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