

## *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*

Charlotte H. Bruner, ed. *African Women's Writing*. African Writers Series. (London: Heinemann, 1993), 211 pp., \$10.95, paper.

*African Women's Writing* is a companion volume to Bruner's *Unwinding Threads*, first published by Heinemann ten years ago. In her "Preface" to this volume, Bruner says that this book came about because "new writers, or hitherto unpublished ones, were not only writing fiction but were recording the New Africa." Thus, only two writers reappear in this volume: Bessie Head of South Africa and Assia Djebar of Algeria, and a good many of the authors were born after 1945.

Likewise, representations of the new Africa ("since 'modernization,' since westernization, since the feminist movement") are prevalent in this collection, though some of the stories take place in traditional village settings ("Mother was a Great Man," by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu of Nigeria; "Saltless Ash," by Zaynab Alkali of Nigeria; "The Rich Heritage," by Daisy Kabagarama of Uganda). This collection has other unique features: stories of African immigrants in Europe, a story of a Jewish schoolgirl in Tunisia ("God on Probation," by Gisèle Halimi), and two stories of guerilla and urban warfare (Andrée Chedid's "Death in Slow Motion," about a sniper-fire victim, and Lina Magia's stark "Madalena returned from captivity," (Mozambique) about a young girl taken by "armed bandits"). Both of these stories are hauntingly evocative of the terror of the situation. Madalena, the returned fourteen-year old child, speaks hardly a word to her rescuers: She "remains in the center of the circle made by the dancers, but she doesn't dance. She sobs....."

As is the case with the first volume, these stories are varied in subject matter, in narrative manner, and in quality. A few are autobiographical; one is a chapter of a novel (Tsitsi Dangarembga's "Nervous Condition—Zimbabwe"). Everything in this splendid novel is worth reprinting, but this particular chapter (the arrival of Tambudzai at her uncle's home) seems like a strange choice since it does not give a fair enough idea of the complexity of the book.

Two of the strongest stories present unusual viewpoints for a collection of African writers: "Cardboard Mansions," by Farida Karodia of South Africa, tells of an Indian grandmother's return to a village on the outskirts of Durban to seek refuge in a lovingly remembered shack. The second, "The Stone Beach," by Leïla Sebbar of Algeria, takes place in a foreign city (Paris?). An immigrant woman in a laundromat remembers washing clothes in a river in her childhood country. Several other women, who do not speak the "local language" and who are wise enough not to show their intimate laundry her own river, its "cascades, its wild pools, the fast flowing stream."

in public like the foreign women, share her lament, each thinking of

Bruner provides a short introductory preface and a longer introduction to each of the four sections (Western, Eastern, Southern, and Northern Africa). The introductions, aimed at a general audience, do not provide in-depth information, but they do give useful antidotes for stereotypical pictures of African women: "often highly trained as sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians, scholars of world literature [the writers] bring a broad perspective to their work. Their female protagonists are as often educated urban women as they are illiterate villagers" (6). Since many of the writers in the volume are not widely known in the west, perhaps most useful to scholars in ethnic studies are Bruner's "Notes on Contributors," which are more extensive than those in *Unwinding Threads*.

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**William L. Burton. *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments*. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988) 282 pp., \$78.90 hardback.**

The title is somewhat misleading if the reader is expecting the author, William L. Burton, to include all ethnic groups in this book. The book is about foreign born ethnic soldiers in the Union Army and excludes Native Americans and Black troops. In fact, the book's major emphasis is on German and Irish soldiers of the Civil War, and largely about the steps taken to organize military units rather than about the battles these groups participated in.

Nevertheless, within its scope, the book is carefully researched and well written. Burton, a professor of history at Western Illinois University, is sometimes quite eloquent stylistically in such passages as:

The Civil War is the great American epic. Nothing in the nation's history did so much to create myth, manufacture legend, challenge the character of the people, and shape the destiny of the nation for so many generations. Dominating the town and city parks in thousands of communities, North and South, is the statue of the soldier. Burton's emphasis on the recruiting and organizing of troops rather than their battle records is explained in his theory that the ethnic regiments, like all of the volunteer regiments of the Union Army, were "a direct outgrowth of local politics" (ix).

The Prologue describes the Forty-eighters, such as Franz leaders in America, and who recruited, organized, and lead regiments.