

Mother writes Yvonne Vera's biography

Title: Petal Thoughts: Yvonne Vera

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Imagine your mother writing your biography! What would she say or leave out and why?

The late write Yvonne Vera's mother, Ericah Gwetai nee Mugadzaweta has written a biography on Yvonne Vera. It is called 'Petal thoughts: Yvonne Vera: A Biography.' More than anything, this amazing book shows that there are highly biographical elements in most of Yvonne Vera's literature.

Did you know that 'Yvonne was a result of an unwanted pregnancy'? Ericah Mugadzaweta, a Luveve girl, discovered by accident that she was two months pregnant when she felt dizzy and passed out at Lobengula Street bus terminus. Ericah was seventeen and the man responsible was one Jerry Vera who worked as a waiter at the Happy Valley Hotel in Nguboyenja township of Bulawayo.

Ericah eloped to Jerry and they even tried unsuccessfully to terminate the pregnancy because Ericah wanted desperately to go for a nurse training course. Readers of Yvonne's Butterfly Burning will remember that there is such an important character in the novel.

The girl, Yvonne moved constantly with her mother to various teaching posts in Bulawayo, Harare and Tsholotsho.

Yvonne's parents parted ways in December 1970 after a huge quarrel when Jerry lost his job. He found it hard to find another job and 'he became aggressive'. Ericah and Yvonne eventually left to teach in Tsholotsho where she met and fall in love with one Lambert Gwetai. Yvonne fell in love with butterflies.

In 1984, during her teaching practice (from Hillside Teachers' College) at Njube High School, Yvonne met a Canadian Maths teacher, John Jose and fell in love. They were married in 1987 in Canada. They remained married until Yvonne's death in April 2005 although they sometimes lived in separate locations because of Yvonne's insistence that she kept in touch with her Zimbabwean writing base.

The biography shows that Yvonne's life and writing culture were dramatic. For instance during one of her visits to Zimbabwe from Canada in 1994, Yvonne read a story from The Chronicle about a woman who had strangled her baby with a necktie. Yvonne immediately disappeared from home. Her people reported her missing with the police. She returned home six days later with a manuscript that was to become 'Without A Name'.

There are indications in this biography that Yvonne was headstrong and had a temper too. When she left for Canada in 1987 to marry John she just left without saying goodbye to her mother.

And more interesting Yvonne's mother writes: "In 1996 was going to interview some female artists who did woodcarving. It was in the evening and I told her that it was not safe for women to travel alone... We argued about that. She bolted out of the house and stood in the middle of Matopos Road. She wanted to commit suicide by being run over by a car... but when cars screeched and swerved to avoid her, I realized that she was determined to do it..."

This book will surely open windows into Vera literature. It also contains testimonies by scores of people close to Vera like her best and long time friend, Kupukile Mlambo (to whom Vera's first full novel, Nehanda is dedicated), her editor and publisher, Irene Staunton, friends: Flora Wild, Terence Ranger, Virginia Phiri and others.

The late Yvonne Vera is probably the most successful woman writer in Zimbabwean to this day in terms of output and intense experimentation with prose.

She specialised on abominations, those subjects that harm the woman's body and mind like rape and abortion. These are subjects that Zimbabwean novels rarely spend their maximum length on. Her women come out of it hugely

scathed and with a statement that woman's meaningful space is very difficult to find in this world.

Vera's prose texts are a collection of short stories called Why Don't You Carve Other Animals(1992) and her novels; Nehanda(1993), Without A Name(1994), Under the Tongue(1996), Butterfly Burning(2000), and The Stone Virgins(2002). Yvonne Vera won the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Africa Region, Best Book) for Under the Tongue. In 2004 she won the PEN Tucholsky Prize for a corpus of work dealing with taboo subjects.

Why Don't You Carve other Animals is a collection with stories that portray women in various circumstances that ask them to step out of their ordinary roles as mothers and wives. In the background is the war of liberation of the 1970's.

Nehanda, Vera's initiation into hypnotic prose poetry writing is based on the Zimbabwean legendary liberation fighter from the 1890's into the Chimurenga of the 1970's. This novel is centred on fictionalising some central aspects of this world-renowned heroine. This novel was short listed for the Commonwealth Prize of 1994.

Without A Name is arguably the most talked about of all Vera literature. Like Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Vera's story is about a woman who travels across society, from one lover to another, in search of love, freedom and fulfillment. Her innocence is shattered much early in life when she is raped by a man in uniform. The touching moment in the text is when she kills her newly born baby and straps the corpse on her back and boards a bus back to her rural home.

Under The Tongue probably marks the maturation of Vera's style and maybe that is why it is considered as her most 'difficult' novel. It is generally the story of a child who has been raped by her father and who, as a result, loses her mother. There are suggestions that the mother kills the husband on discovering his crime and due to death or imprisonment, leaves the child Zhizha with her grandparents. This is a novel with a very haunting quality to it.

Butterfly Burning is about a girl, Phephelapi who meets an older man, Fumbatha in Bulawayo during the 1940's. Their relationship offers the girl a certain measure of comfort but her pregnancy shatters her desire to become a

nurse. A resultant abortion ruins her relationship with her man. After her second pregnancy she kills herself by dousing herself with paraffin and setting herself alight because again the pregnancy is connected with her failure to join nursing. This excruciating novel highlights the plight of ambitious women in a colonial set up.

The Stone Virgins won Vera the Macmillan prize for Africa in 2002. In 2006 it won the Aidoo/Snyder Prize, two years after its publication. Set in the outskirts of Bulawayo, this novel explores the trials and tribulations of very close sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba during and just after the war of liberation. It opens up the effects of the counter warfare between government forces and dissidents on the lives of ordinary people.

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