

□ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 370**

**YEARBOOK 2013**

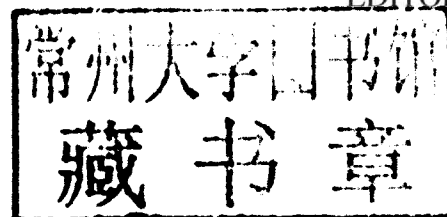


Volume 370

# Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook 2013

A Retrospective Covering the Year's  
New Authors, Prizewinners, and Obituaries

Lawrence J. Trudeau  
EDITOR



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# Preface

**C**ontemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook is part of the ongoing *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series. After a ten-year hiatus in which no *CLC Yearbook* volumes were published from 1998-2007, the *CLC Yearbook* volumes are now published once annually, beginning with Volume 280, a literary retrospective of 2008. *CLC* provides a comprehensive survey of modern literature by presenting criticism on the works of novelists, poets, playwrights, short-story writers, scriptwriters, and other creative writers now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. A strong emphasis is placed on including criticism of works by established authors who frequently appear on syllabuses of high school and college literature courses.

To complement this broad coverage, the *CLC Yearbook* focuses more specifically on a given year's literary activities and features a larger number of currently noteworthy authors than is possible in standard *CLC* volumes. *CLC Yearbook* provides students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and general readers with information and commentary on the outstanding literary works and events of a given year.

## Format of the Book

*CLC* Volume 370: Yearbook 2013, which includes criticism on thirteen authors, is divided into three sections—"New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" entries.

**New Authors**—This section introduces six writers who received significant critical recognition for their first major work(s) of fiction during 2013 or whose work was translated into English or published in the United States for the first time. Authors were selected for inclusion if their work was reviewed in several prominent literary periodicals.

**Prizewinners**—This section begins with a list of literary prizes and honors announced in 2013, citing the award, award criteria, the recipient, and the title of the prizewinning work (if applicable). Following the listing of prizewinners is a presentation of three entries on individual award winners, representing a mixture of genres and nationalities.

**In Memoriam**—This section consists of critical essays, reminiscences, tributes, retrospective articles, and obituary notices on four authors who died during 2013. In addition, an Obituaries section follows the four "In Memoriam" entries. The Obituaries provide brief biographical information on other deceased prominent literary figures who died during 2013.

## Organization of the Book

The *CLC Yearbook* consists of criticism drawn from literary reviews, general magazines, newspapers, websites, books, and scholarly journals. *Yearbook* entries variously contain the following elements:

- An **Author Heading** in the "New Authors" and "Prizewinners" sections cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, and the title of the work discussed in the entry (if applicable); the "In Memoriam" section includes the author's name and birth and death years. The author's full name, pseudonyms (if any) under which the author has published, nationality, and principal genres are listed on the first line of the author entry.
- A brief **Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the reprinted criticism in the "New Authors" sections.
- A **Biographical Information, Major Works, and Critical Reception** section contains background information that introduces the reader to the author or work that is the subject of each "Prizewinners" entry and each "In Memoriam" entry.
- A listing of **Principal Works** is included for all entries in the "Prizewinners" and "In Memoriam" sections.



- The reprinted **Criticism** represents essays selected by editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's writing in general. The criticism is typically arranged chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. In the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" sections, all titles by the author being discussed are printed in boldface type, enabling the reader to more easily identify the author's work.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation**, designed to help the user find the original essay or book, precedes each selected piece of reprinted criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. **Cross references**, presented as boxed material, following the Further Reading list provide references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

## Other Features

The *CLC Yearbook* also includes the following features:

An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of this volume.

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literary Criticism Series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks. All titles reviewed in *CLC* and in the other Literary Criticism Series can be found online in the *Gale Literary Index*.

## Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hébert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 188-95. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hébert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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## **New Authors**







# NoViolet Bulawayo

## *We Need New Names*

(Born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele; also wrote under the pseudonyms NoViolet Mkha and NoViolet Mkha Bulawayo) Zimbabwean novelist and short-story writer.

The following entry provides an overview of critical response to Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* (2013).

### INTRODUCTION

NoViolet Bulawayo was born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele in Tscholotsho District, Zimbabwe, in 1981, shortly after that country's independence from British colonial rule. She attended Mzilikazi High School in the town of Bulawayo before moving to the United States to attend college. In a 2013 interview with Claire Cameron of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (see Further Reading), she remembered her initial difficulty in adapting to life in the United States: "I spent my first college year in silence in the classroom. Outside of that, I was too aware of it as a space that was not my home to fully melt into its melting pot." Bulawayo described her expatriate experience in a 2013 interview with David Smith as "a story of perpetual mourning for what is gone." She eventually succeeded as a student, however, and after studying briefly at Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Bulawayo transferred to Texas A&M University-Commerce, where she earned her BA in English; she received her MA in English from Southern Methodist University in 2007. She earned an MFA in creative writing from Cornell University, where she was awarded a Truman Capote Fellowship. Bulawayo's short story "Snapshots" was selected for inclusion in the 2009 volume of *New Writing from Africa*, edited by J. M. Coetzee and Robin Malan. For her written work, she adopted the pseudonym NoViolet Bulawayo, sometimes using the middle name Mkha; the surname was taken from her hometown in Zimbabwe. In 2010, she published the story "Hitting Budapest" in the *Boston Review*. That story, which became the first chapter of her novel, was awarded the Caine Prize for African Writing. Bulawayo's first novel, *We Need New Names*, was well received, garnering numerous honors, including the Guardian First Book Award and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Bulawayo was also short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, the first Zimbabwean to achieve that distinction. She is currently a Stegner Fellow in fiction at Stanford University.

*We Need New Names* is narrated in the first person from the point of view of a Zimbabwean girl named Darling, who is ten years old at the novel's opening. The story begins in 2000, amid the political turmoil associated with Robert

Mugabe's reign over postcolonial Zimbabwe. Darling lives in a shantytown called Paradise with her friends Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Sbho, and Stina; the children's parents have been forced from their homes for their opposition to Mugabe. Life in Paradise is harsh; the children are surrounded by violence and death, and they constantly face the threat of hunger. In one episode, they decide to steal the new shoes from a corpse in order to buy bread. Darling's eleven-year-old friend Chipo has been impregnated by her grandfather, a situation the children only partly understand. Despite their dire situation, Darling and her friends carve out their own world of games, laughter, and imagination. They sneak into a rich suburban neighborhood called Budapest, where they explore and steal fruit; they play juvenile games with such names as "Find bin Laden" and "Country-Game." The latter involves fighting over who gets to be the best countries—the United States, Canada, Britain, and France—while the losers are left with such countries as Dubai and South Africa. No one chooses Zimbabwe. Darling's experiences reflect many of the sociopolitical problems of modern Zimbabwe. Her father returns from South Africa with AIDS. As national elections approach, the government moves to destroy the shantytown, an act of political reprisal for its residents' opposition to Mugabe's policies.

The narrative abruptly shifts when Darling receives word that her aunt, who lives in Michigan, wants her to move to the United States and live there with her. Upon arrival, Darling struggles to adjust to her new life. She has plenty to eat, begins work at a grocery store, and discovers the internet. In one scene, Darling and her new friends first learn of female genital mutilation by watching an online video. Despite the relative comfort of her new life in Michigan things are far from perfect: there is gun violence at school and the reality of American life is far different from the opulence she imagined as a young girl in Zimbabwe. Perhaps more important, the difficulty of transitioning from girlhood to young womanhood is compounded in Darling's case, as she struggles to adapt to the new culture and surroundings. At the novel's close, after a difficult conversation with Chipo, a friend she left behind, Darling comes to the realization that Zimbabwe remains her home.

*We Need New Names* received overwhelmingly positive reviews upon publication. Many critics have singled out Bulawayo's inventive use of language. An anonymous reviewer from *Publishers Weekly* (2013; see Further Reading) noted that her "use of English is disarmingly fresh, her arrangement of words startling." Helon Habila (2013; see Further Reading) called Bulawayo a "talented and ambitious author," arguing that what keeps her novel



from “collapsing under its own thematic weight is a certain linguistic verve.” In a 2013 interview with Judith Rosen, Bulawayo pointed out the extra care she took to compose the novel in English, which was not her everyday spoken language as a child. “In writing I have to arrive in translation,” she explained. Although Percy Zvomuya (2013) criticized what he called the novel’s “dulled narrative conclusion,” he offered praise for its powerful opening chapters and the wit of its narration. Jim Hannan (2014) praised the “kinetic energy” of Bulawayo’s writing, and recommended *We Need New Names* to “anyone interested in emerging voices in world literature.”

Eric Barger

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

“Flag.” As NoViolet Mkha Bulawayo. *Warwick Review* 3.4 (2009). (Short story)

“Poems.” *State of the Nation: Contemporary Zimbabwean Poetry*. Ed. Tinashe Mushakavanhu and David Nettleingham. Faversham: Conversation, 2009. (Poetry)

“Snapshots.” As NoViolet Mkha Bulawayo. *New Writing from Africa*. Ed. J. M. Coetzee and Robin Malan. Cape Town: Johnson and King James, 2009. 343-54. (Short story)

“Hitting Budapest.” *Boston Review* 35.6 (2010): 43-7. (Short story)

“Siphepheli.” *Thaph’ uluju: Iqoqo lezindatshana, ilifa lakho*. Ed. Barbara C. Nkala. Harare: Radiant, 2010. (Short story)

“Main.” *African Roar 2011: An Annual Anthology of African Authors*. Ed. Emmanuel Sigauke and Ivor Hartmann. N.p.: StoryTime, 2011. (Short story)

“Shamisos.” As NoViolet Mkha. *Writing Free*. Ed. Irene Staunton. Harare: Weaver, 2011. 73-85. (Short story)

*We Need New Names*. New York: Arthur, 2013. (Novel)

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## CRITICISM

### NoViolet Bulawayo and Judith Rosen (interview date 2013)

SOURCE: Bulawayo, NoViolet. “Close to Home.” Interview by Judith Rosen. *Publishers Weekly* 1 Apr. 2013: 35-6. Print.

[In the following interview, Bulawayo describes the challenges of writing *We Need New Names* in English. Pointing out that English is not her everyday language, she notes, “In writing I have to arrive in translation.”]

“We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipu and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. We are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road, even though Bastard is supposed to be watching his little sister Fraction, even though Mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are just going.” So begins the opening chapter of NoViolet Bulawayo’s debut novel, *We Need New Names* (Little, Brown/Reagan Arthur Books, May 21). The book is set in Paradise—no, not *that* Paradise, and not that Budapest either—a shantytown in an unnamed country resembling the Zimbabwe of Operation Murambatsvina (Drive Out the Trash), a government sponsored program of forced relocation. The book follows a gang of kids whose families have been left with nothing after their homes and belongings are taken from them and they are resettled there. Their best chance for a better life lies elsewhere: in other parts of Africa or abroad.

For the author, 31-year-old Zimbabwe native NoViolet Bulawayo, what happens to these children is personal. Bulawayo was one of the “born frees”—the generation who grew up after the U.K. granted the country (then Rhodesia) independence in 1980—and she attended school, but the relative peace of the post-independence era ended just before she emigrated to live with her aunt in Kalamazoo, Mich., and attend college at age 18. Even in America, Zimbabwe has never been far from Bulawayo’s mind. “You don’t forget home,” she says. The name she chose for herself five years ago celebrates her family and homeland: “NoViolet” literally means “with Violet” (after her mother, who died when Bulawayo was just 18 months old); and “Bulawayo” is Zimbabwe’s second-largest city, where she grew up.

We meet at Winter Institute 8 at the Westin Downtown hotel in Kansas City, Mo. Bulawayo is here for the author reception. As we talk in the hotel lobby, executives from other publishers—including Graywolf, Random House, and Workman—try to engage her in conversation. Her book has had a big impact already: the opening chapter was published in *The Boston Review* and went on to win the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing, often referred to as the African Booker. The journal’s fiction editor, Junot Díaz, wrote, “I knew this writer was going to blow up. Her honesty, her voice, her formidable command of her craft—all were apparent from the first page.”

In person, Bulawayo exhibits the same intensity and electricity that comes through in her writing, as she talks about her life, her work, and the “horrors” that led her to write a book “engaged with reality.” “It’s not a *fiction* fiction book,” she says. “It’s very much born out of politics.” Although the period when the events in the novel occur is never specified, the book describes what happened to Zimbabwe under Mugabe’s rule after Bulawayo left. Inspired by information gleaned from the Internet, social media, and calls home, the author puts a face to her country’s grim statistics—80% unemployment and an inflation



rate that hit 6.5 sextillion percent in 2008—and to the many who disappeared. She writes of her homeland where store shelves are empty and a neighbor dies because the hospital has no electricity. “Can you imagine calling home,” asks Bulawayo, “and hearing all this desperation, horrors we couldn’t do anything about? I wrote about it.”

One of the most striking things about the book is Bulawayo’s decision to tell the story through the eyes of an innocent young girl, Darling, and her group of friends—Godknows and the other kids she sneaks off to Budapest with to steal guavas. “There is something universal about kids. We can all relate to them. They are children; they have no power. The kids in the book were inspired by my friendships,” says Bulawayo. She grew up in a large extended family and had seven siblings. After her mother died, her father remarried and had three children. Her grandfather had four wives. She lost a brother and a sister to AIDS.

“Being a kid, you’re juggling a lot,” says Bulawayo. In *We Need New Names*, the children provide an innocent counterpoint to the atrocities around them, which they accept even as they remember better times. They play games like the “Country Game,” which Bulawayo herself played as a child. In the game, each person gets to be a country, and they all want “country-countries” like the U.S., Britain, Canada, and Germany. “Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka,” Bulawayo writes in the book. Another of their games, “Find Bin Laden,” she made up. “Bin Laden occupies a fixed position in America, and I wondered about what it means to kids in Zimbabwe,” she says.

But the book also encapsulates the immigrant experience and what happens to Darling when she comes to America. Bulawayo wanted to tell a story rooted in both worlds—Zimbabwe and America—and to give voice to all the immigrants without green cards whose movements are restricted. In a chapter called “How They Lived,” she contrasts what the immigrants thought they would find in the U.S. with their experiences after arriving there, and she uses the first-person plural voice to be inclusive of all immigrants.

Bulawayo says that the challenge of writing *We Need New Names* was bringing all the things that have happened in Zimbabwe and America together in a single book—one in which each chapter can stand on its own. Writing it in a language not her own added to the difficulty. Although English is an official language in Zimbabwe, “we didn’t use it to communicate,” says Bulawayo. When she came to the U.S. at 18, she already had family here—a sister and a couple of cousins, in addition to her aunt. “I don’t speak English every day,” she says. “In writing I have to arrive in translation,” she says, referring to the fact that she thinks each sentence in her native language, then translates it into English before writing it down. For the reader, however,

her prose is seamless. Caine Award judge Hisham Matar said that Bulawayo’s language “crackles,” and called her gang of children “reminiscent of *Clockwork Orange*.”

“I feel very lucky,” says Bulawayo about her writing career in general and the book in particular. “It was so humbling to do what I love and have people respond. It’s so mind-blowing.” Currently, as the 2012 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she is working on a collection of AIDS stories, which began as a memoir about all that she has lost. She’s also done some playwriting. “I can’t just write fiction,” she says. “With all this time [from the fellowship], I’m like a kid in a candy store.”

She has begun doing some traveling and plans to return to Zimbabwe for the first time in more than a decade. Ideally, she would like to split her time between the U.S and Zimbabwe. It’s not the future her father envisioned for her when he sent her to the U.S. to study law. Instead of a law degree, she got a masters in literature from Southern Methodist University and an M.F.A. at Cornell University, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow. What she says about her work could apply to her life as well: “I just let the story go where it goes.”

### Percy Zvomuya (review date 2013)

SOURCE: Zvomuya, Percy. “A Zimbabwean Story of Loss and Change.” Rev. of *We Need New Names*, by No-Violet Bulawayo. *Mail and Guardian*. Mail and Guardian, 2 Aug. 2013. Web. 15 Aug. 2014.

[In the following review, Zvomuya singles out the powerful opening chapters of *We Need New Names* and the wit of its narration. Though he considers the end of the book to offer a “dulled narrative conclusion,” he maintains that Bulawayo “is the real thing.”]

“**Hitting Budapest,**” the first chapter of NoViolet Bulawayo’s novel *We Need New Names*, is probably the best section of the book. It’s not just the bravery and brazenness of the young urchin protagonists as they maraud around an affluent neighbourhood looking for guavas, but also the naive, hilarious narrative voice deployed by its author.

That first chapter won her the Caine Prize in 2011. Now she is in line for another gong: she is on the long list for the Man Booker Prize. With prizes seemingly piling up, it’s safe to say that Bulawayo is one of the most exciting writers to emerge from Africa in the past few years.

If you think her name is improbable, it’s because it is an acquired handle. It’s almost as if the author, listening to her own injunction of needing new names, gave herself a strange, novel one. She was born Elizabeth Tshele in 1981, in Tsholo-tsho, Zimbabwe, and moved to the United States when she was 18.



She belongs to the most hated, which is to say the most revolutionary, age group in Zimbabwe, those born after 1980. Commonly known as born-frees, this bunch won't take nonsense repackaged as nationalist platitudes and revolutionary mantras. Indeed, there is a character in the book from the opposition ranks, Bornfree Lizwe Tapera, born in 1983, who is murdered for his anti-establishment stance.

The most striking thing about Bulawayo's debut novel, perhaps above everything else, is the way it's narrated: the pseudo-childlike and naive voice. How to explain it? Well, think of a Yvonne Vera or Toni Morrison, that knows how to crack jokes.

The truth, of course, is that no child ever spoke like this (certainly not that I've heard), but we want to imagine that this is the way kids speak. This allows Bulawayo to come up with startling metaphors ('We didn't eat this morning and my stomach feels like somebody took a shovel and dug everything out'), mangled syntax, a Zimbabwean vernacular reimagination into English of things like knock-knees, which she dubs 'kiss knees,' or 'he looks shocked, like he has seen the buttocks of a snake.' Perhaps this is shocking to a native speaker of English, but quite common for second-language speakers.

#### THE POLITICS OF ZIMBABWE

The childlike voice allows the author to tackle difficult subjects, giving them a potency that they wouldn't ordinarily have if said by an adult. Talking about the politics of Zimbabwe (although never overtly identified), one of the child protagonists asks: 'Yes, but what exactly is it, this change?' After the Movement for Democratic Change's cohabitation arrangement with Zanu-PF, in which they have proved to be as inept as the party they have fought for more than a decade, one begins to wonder whether the MDC is a viable alternative.

When Darling attempts to solve the problem of God in those deceptively simple accents, I thought the only genuine atheism is not the educated Richard Dawkins kind, but the one espoused by children: 'Instead of asking God nicely, people should be demanding and questioning and threatening to stop worshipping him. Maybe that way, he would think differently and try to make things right, like he is supposed to.'

It's the same voice deployed when she contemplates the approaching death of her father, recently returned from South Africa and terminally ill with AIDS. She conjures a familiar world in which a veil is laid over death and dying that is reminiscent of the time I was growing up. In the 1980s, it sometimes felt as though no one was really dying in Zimbabwe; but then coming of age in the 1990s, all of a sudden it seemed as if everyone was preparing to die, dying or dead already.

So rare was death in the 1980s that whenever a funeral was passing our home, my mother forced me to go indoors. From behind a parted curtain, I would watch the procession of death.

Darling isn't afraid of death because her slum settlement is right next to a cemetery. 'There is just no sense in being afraid when you live so near the graves; it would be like the tongue fearing the teeth.'

If Zimbabwe is never really identified (its avatar, Rhodesia, is once or twice invoked), the US, the other half of the book's setting, is unmistakable. After the collapse of things in the other country, our narrator goes to live in the US with an aunt, Fostalina. She initially settles in what the narrator calls Destroyedmichygen (Detroit, Michigan), which, after the city's recent bankruptcy filing, acquires a new tincture.

#### GRASS IS NEVER GREENER YONDER

But the grass is never greener yonder, as she soon discovers.

After I tweeted that Bulawayo (remember it's the person, not the city) is the real thing, I got into a conversation with a friend about her vision. Indeed, her idea of Zimbabwe is quite depressing. In her defence, it's difficult to be anything but depressed after talking to anyone who went through Operation Murambatsvina, the destruction of 'slums' ordered by Robert Mugabe, the violence meted out to opposition activists and the meltdown of 2008.

My friend and I landed up talking about Nigerian writer Uwem Akpan, a previous finalist for a Caine Prize. The vision of his book of short stories, *Say You're One of Them*, is bleak and its accents negative.

So could you compare Bulawayo with Akpan? Not really. I guess one of the reasons is that the child narrator explodes the tension of some of the heavy things that take place in the novel. The onerous becomes light, the serious acquires a certain playfulness.

If Bulawayo's first chapter is the best, then the chapter 'How they lived' isn't far off. Easily the most poetic and most desolate section of the novel, it is the kind of document one imagines an exile would write. It is a moving testament of a migrant marooned in a hostile world, stuck in the unfriendly new home yet yearning but unable to return to his or her 'real' home.

And then our own children were born. We held their American birth certificates tight. We did not name our children after our parents, after ourselves; we feared if we did they would not be able to say their own names . . . We gave them names that would make them belong in America, names that did not mean anything to us.

Whatever force sustained the novel until then dissipates when the narrator realises that the US isn't really the fabled land of opportunity. Vanished hopes, cracked dreams and



homesickness take a toll on the mind as some of the characters slide into dementia and schizophrenia. It's almost as if the realisation of the 'hard-knocks' realities blunts the edginess of the narrative and the energies that sustained it.

Surely this is to do with the narrator growing up and saying things in the world that an adult would supposedly say. The stylised world she has imagined through her inventive voice, idiosyncratic register and reverse collocation work for 200 or so pages before crumbling. The result is a dulled narrative conclusion, the antithesis of the beginning.

Still, I do think NoViolet Bulawayo is the real thing.

### NoViolet Bulawayo and David Smith (interview date 2013)

SOURCE: Bulawayo, NoViolet. "NoViolet Bulawayo Tells of Heartbreak of Homecoming in Mugabe's Zimbabwe." Interview by David Smith. *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Group, 4 Sept. 2013. Web. 15 Aug. 2014.

*[In the following interview, Bulawayo describes her childhood in Zimbabwe and discusses her relationship to her home. "For me," she explains, "life outside the homeland is a story of perpetual mourning for what is gone. It's amazing how the simplest things can trigger that melancholy, from walking down the street and hearing on the car radio a song from home, to the smell of food, to a face that looks like somebody's face."]*

A striking pen name certainly never did an author any harm on a crowded bookshelf. NoViolet Bulawayo passes with flying colours. NoViolet means "with Violet," in memory of her mother who died when she was 18 months old. Bulawayo is her yearned-for home city in Zimbabwe.

"I come from a place of colourful names and identity's a big part of my creative process," the 31-year-old, whose passport still says Elizabeth Tshele, explained during a book tour of neighbouring South Africa. "I needed a meaningful identity that could carry the weight of whatever I'm doing. Just being without my biological mother shaped the person I am, the way I see the world."

Bulawayo's debut novel, not entitled *We Need New Names* by accident, is the first by a Zimbabwean to be longlisted for the 44-year-old Man Booker Prize and is also in contention for the *Guardian* first book award. It has announced her as one of Africa's most luminous literary talents and, it was evident in an interview this week, a eloquent voice among a new generation of Zimbabweans unafraid and trenchant in their criticism of president Robert Mugabe.

Bulawayo was born after Mugabe came to power at Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. She emigrated at 18, joining her aunt in America, and returned from exile for the first time in April this year. In just 13 turbulent years, she discovered, the Eden that she ached for had turned into a

place she hardly recognised. "It was a strange country," Bulawayo told the *Guardian*. "I went there in search of the Zimbabwe I knew and it was a shock: power cuts, water cuts, just driving down the streets the potholes were amazing, and 80% of the population not working. Just seeing the desperation, wherever you went, people were struggling. That was a picture of the country that I never knew.

I knew from news and stories that things were hard, but being there and seeing it for myself was just heartbreaking. Even now knowing that there are no answers, and it's not going to get better any time soon, is crushing.

The homecoming was a bittersweet experience for the writer, currently based at Stanford University in California. "On one hand I was happy to be home and seeing my father—he's 74 and his health was acting up at that time—and my siblings, but at the same time I couldn't relate to anything, I couldn't understand anything, I felt like the country had changed the people and culture and I just felt like an outsider in my home. So I would be having conversations and I'd just tune out, and yet people didn't realise what was happening, that I was home but I was also lost."

During her absence Zimbabwe endured chaotic farm seizures, economic meltdown, hyperinflation and elections scarred by political violence and, in July this year, allegations of ballot rigging on an industrial scale. She respects Mugabe's part in the liberation struggle but believes the 89-year-old must now bear responsibility for her paradise lost.

There was a time when he was good for the country but I feel like that time is gone. The last election spoke to it all, obviously. I think a balanced person would be hard pressed to just stand and say this guy is a good guy, with all the facts on the table. It's quite sad that a country with so much promise is forced on its knees because of the ruling party. I just hope that culture changes.

I feel like we need a new breed of leadership, not just a presidential figure but a new gang. For me the answer lies with the young people because I feel the current generation is old, it's outdated and it has failed the people.

The government has been in power since just before I was born and I think it's time to give the ball to better players. I feel like Zimbabweans are capable enough and the reality is they don't have a voice or the space.

Following his disputed election win, Mugabe received a standing ovation from the presidents of his southern African neighbours and was elected the next leader of their regional bloc. But Bulawayo has no truck with attempts to rehabilitate the legacy of a man accused of ethnic cleansing, orchestrating political violence and serial cheating at the polls.

If you haven't directly suffered, if you haven't directly felt the brunt of the cost of his person and his rule, it's easy to have that perspective from a distance. In the States, people actually hail him as one of Africa's leading statesmen, but the reality is the people on the ground have a different story and that's part of why I wrote the book.

My generation is known as the born free generation: we really don't buy this stance against the west because we