

Perhaps the hardest test for this book is to pass the minority litmus paper test. That is, would one recommend its use with/for minority students. As a social psychologist, a minority group member, and a teacher, the answer is a strong yes!

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Mongane Serote. *To Every Birth Its Blood*. African Writers Series 263. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1984) 206 pp., \$6.50 paper.

Mongane Serote is a poet of considerable merit; this I should have discovered from reading his novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, even had I not heard and seen him read his poetry to an African Literature Association Conference in 1975. The novel, however, is not obtrusively poetic; rather, its physical and psychological insights are apt and genuine parts of an integral whole, not ends in and of themselves. Yet a careful reader will respond most positively to such expression. I cite as an example a poignant observation of a loving wife, frustrated in silent pain:

Her husband fell asleep while she listened to her throbbing head, and her eyes seemed to have taken over the beat from the heart.

But for all its exquisite observations and poetic felicity, the novel is to be praised primarily for what it tells and teaches. It is the protest brought up to date (publication 1981) which Southern African writers Paton, Rive, Mhpahlele, La Guma, Nkosi, and Brutus began making to a largely unreading public. It is a book which the Falwells of our world ought to be compelled to read and understand; it is also one which well-meaning intellectuals should read.

It is, in one way, the same story of apartheid and the brutality of many South African whites and of the hypocrisy which “justifies” a sadism

under which blacks suffer and die. But it is unique also. It is measured, balanced reporting from the heart of its author whose passion for integrity is everywhere apparent. Its means is largely a series of family groups whose human stories become partly interwoven as various of their members become involved in the Movement and/or are destroyed by the government. Their stories, however, are largely personal inter-relationships of day-to-day human acts of kindness, selfishness, love, confused stupidities, bright loyalties. The individuals are many; there are no duplicates. There is great and ennobling understanding to be got by the thoughtful reader.

The novel has two distinct parts: the first part might fail to catch and hold the attention one should give it, and for an inescapably honest reason: the time period before the “crisis” government repressions did know a number of “street people” whose desires and acts often seemed limited to drink, fornication, and vulgar language. In honestly letting the reader know these people, Serote of course risks failure to elicit reader sympathy. But the reader who reads carefully and persists into and through Part II discovers even those persons whose acts in Part I seemed at times immature are not—and never were—the simple beings the reader might have suspected.

True, Serote summarizes a great deal. True, he speaks sometimes in the first-person voice of Tsi and interrupts with his own generalizations whose philosophical and psychological foci are complex and even profound. True, Part II introduces many new characters, even families, whose identities the reader must get clear in order to know what is happening. But the poet does his job so well that the reader’s effort is a happy one.

To Every Birth Its Blood does not offer solutions; it does not establish a cliché of hope; it does not wallow in gloom or sensation. It does show in a convincing way the multi-faceted and inexcusable horror and injustice of South Africa and robs any intelligent and honest reader of the ability to hoodwink himself or others, as many Western political leaders have done and yet do.

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