

# Sierra Leonean wins Caine Prize

Olufemi Terry's short story, "Stickfighting Days", won this year's Caine Prize, otherwise known as the African Booker. Uchenna Izundu went to meet him and the prize committee.

**M**ANY EMERGING WRITERS take up a sideline to pay the bills. For Sierra Leonean Olufemi Terry, journalism is the full-time paying job – fiction writing is the fun part, which will lead to the publication of his first novel. So, winning the £10,000 Caine Prize, dubbed Africa's Booker, is a milestone to helping achieve that ambition. His achievement is particularly commendable considering that "Stickfighting Days" is only the second short story that he has written. It was inspired whilst living in Kenya and written over 10 days.

"There was very little that was fixed in my head when I began writing and it came out of me in a flood," says Terry. "Stickfighting Days", published in the South African literary magazine *Chimurenga*, follows a group of boys who sniff glue and fight each other with sticks in a dump. "Mormegil is as long as our regulations allow, a lovely willow poke, dark willow – that's why I chose the name. It means black sword in Tolkien's language," says Terry's narrator. "Mormegil is a killing machine, even though I've never done for anyone yet. But I will. I like Markham, but I'd like to kill him. I dream of doing it in front of a huge pack of boys. Clinically."

Fiammetta Rocco, chair of the judging panel, described Terry's entry as having "a heroic culture that is Homeric in its scale and conception. The execution of this story is so tight and the presentation so cinematic, it confirms Olufemi Terry as a talent with an enormous future."

The award for the Caine Prize, which recognises African talent for a short story in English, also includes a month's resi-

Olufemi Terry and a bust of the late Sir Michael Caine, in whose memory the Caine Prize is awarded

dency (with all expenses) paid at Georgetown University in Washington DC. Terry was shocked when he won and wants to take advantage of the profile to publish his debut novel *The Sum of All Losses*. It is a coming of age story in New York involving two young men from Cameroon and Nigeria. One is yearning to return home whilst the other feels estranged from everywhere that he has been. It is a testing friendship that culminates with one trying to save the other and failing.

Terry was born of Sierra Leonean and Vincentian heritage. His father's role as a research scientist means Terry lived in Nigeria, the UK, Côte d'Ivoire, the USA, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and South Africa. His next home is Germany where he will join his partner. His name Olufemi is Yoruba and means "God loves me", but the 38-year-old Terry is an atheist. It was his realisation as a young man that he didn't speak any of the major languages that triggered his sense of disconnect from Nigeria despite feeling Nigerian as a child.

"I felt sad about it," he says. "As long as I'm speaking English I can pretend to be Nigerian. I don't feel I belong in either camp: those who were born to African parents abroad and grew up calling themselves Nigerian or Sierra Leonean or those who grew up in Africa but schooled in the West and stayed there. I moved around a lot in Africa and lived in Kenya. I feel like I'm in a middle place."

Obtaining his undergraduate degree in political science and a masters in interac-



#### Other shortlisted writers

The chair of judges, *The Economist* literary editor Fiammetta Rocco, described the shortlist as boasting "an added dimension – a voice, character or particular emotional connection – that makes it uniquely powerful."

**Ken Barris** (South Africa) "The Life of Worm" from *New Writing from Africa 2009*

**Lily Mabura** (Kenya) "How Shall We Kill the Bishop?" from *Wasafiri*, No 53, Spring 2008

**Namwali Serpell** (Zambia) "Muzungu" from *The Best American Short Stories 2009*

**Alex Smith** (South Africa) "Soulmates" from *New Writing from Africa 2009*

tive telecommunications in New York was challenging as the city's culture was alienating. "It applies a lot of pressure on one to conform despite presenting itself as being liberal," Terry reflects. "I find England much more idiosyncratic in the way that people dress and their viewpoints on a range of issues."

Perhaps this journey of resettling explains his drive to tell stories of Africans in the diaspora, who Terry feels have their own unique challenges and perspectives. Although he started writing at the age of 10 in boarding school in the UK, Terry was not seriously writing until late 2006 when he was preparing to move to Cape Town to fulfil his dream of writing a novel.

"There is still a lot of focus on African writing in the village. We've all read *Ant-hills of the Savannah* and *Things Fall Apart*, both by Chinua Achebe. I feel that there are a lot of interesting things happening with young Africans living outside the continent. I would like to read more books like that and this is one of the reasons why I'm writing my own," says Terry.

One of his favourite authors is James Salter, an American who wrote *Light Years*: "An incredible book that gives me goosebumps," Terry says. Others are Americans James Baldwin and Cormac McCarthy, and the British-Nigerian Diana Evans. He loves their visual imagery, sentence construction, and how they evoke emotion.

Readers need to tell publishers what can be done better so that African writers can be better promoted in the West-

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ern mainstream, having been sidelined as "specialist", making it tricky to strike big deals with large publishing houses initially or secure glitzy marketing campaigns like their Caucasian counterparts.

For Ghanaian writer, Nii Ayikwei Parkes, the issue is also complicated by mainstream bookstores displaying African authors under different categories, such as "Black", "cultural studies" or even "anthropology". This experience led him to host an African Book Market Evening in July in London, which aimed to offer readers discounts on various African writers published in the UK and link authors and publishers with the public.

For some years, three major awards championed African short writing: the Caine Prize, the Pen/Studzinski Literary Award, and the Noma, the last of which was not solely for short stories but tended to highlight single collections of them. Noma has now ended with Nigeria's Seffi Atta being the last recipient for *Lawless and Other Stories*. Since 1979, 180 titles have been honoured in six African languages: Afrikaans, English, French, Gikuyu, Portuguese and Swahili.

Ironically the Caine Prize acts like a "gatekeeper" for aspiring African writers as only publishers can submit material and not writers themselves. Last year there was an influx of Zimbabwean submissions, but none made it to the shortlist as they lacked depth and were unpolished. Ellah Grant, one of the judges, acknowledged that many writers were working under difficult circumstances, within education systems that had collapsed. The prize has been key in bringing African talent into the mainstream with previous winners like Brian Chikwava in 2004, from Zimbabwe, whose first novel *Harare North* was published by Jonathan Cape in 2009.

Sudan's Leila Aboulela, winner of the first Caine Prize in 2000, publishes her new novel *Lyrics Alley* in January 2011 with Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and August 2010 will see the publication by Hamish Hamilton of *Oil on Water*, the third novel by the Nigerian writer Helon Habila, who won the second Caine Prize in 2001.

Running for the past 11 years, and with these successes, could the Caine Prize eventually be wound up? Grant hopes not. "Anything that puts money in the pockets of writers is a good thing." ■NA