

Review by Alistair Clark and Ester Scarpa for *African Literature Today* of

A River called Time by Mia Couto,

Translated from *Um rio chamado Tempo, uma casa chamada Terra* by David Brookshaw, Serpent's Tail, United Kingdom, 2008.

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Mia Couto is Mozambique's best known writer, with many short stories, poems and novels to his name, most famously the ground-breaking *A Sleepwalking Land* (Terra Sonâmbula) of 1992. Born in 1955, his Portuguese parents brought him up as part of Mozambique, so that doubts about where his loyalties lay were settled during adolescence, he says (*Isto é*, Brazil, 26/09/2007). A journalist and environmental biologist from Beira, Couto was an activist for Frelimo (Mozambique Liberation Front) in his country's liberation struggle and civil war, but he has also been concerned about its subsequent development, a theme that permeates much of his writing.

Reading Couto is a pleasure because his writing captivates and enchants in its mix of reality and fantasy. As Doris Lessing points out on the back of this UK edition, Mia Couto is "quite unlike anything else ... from Africa". His admired ability for expressively creating new words in Portuguese reminds the Brazilian reader of Guimarães Rosa, one of Brazil's greatest writers who wrote in the 1950's and 60's. Like Couto, Rosa created a very distinctive literary language by using both regional and sophisticated invented vocabulary. The nature of such a creative process must make translating Couto an even greater challenge than usual, so it is a pleasure to read this edition in English of *A River called Time* (Um Rio Chamado Tempo, Uma Casa Chamada Terra). David Brookshaw has done a fine job, producing a text that reads and flows well without sacrificing the deliberate suggestiveness of the Portuguese names of some of the characters.

Summoned for his grandfather's funeral, Mariano travels from the city to the island after many years away. But his grandfather is not quite dead, even though the wake has begun and his grave is dug. The island's Goan doctor says he is clinically dead, but still just breathing in a cataleptic state. His demented widowed grandmother wants Mariano to take charge, apparently going against the tradition of seniority, with varying reactions from relatives. Then unsigned letters start appearing for Mariano, written as if from his grandfather, whose body is found lying outside the coffin the morning after his death. The letters warn against machinations of the family, guide his way forward and eventually illuminate as events unfold.

The reader's natural curiosity about just what is happening here, as if reading a detective novel, is immediately dominated by the captivating tone of the book, its dream-like narrative, unconcluded dialogues, and Mariano's unanswered questions. The novel, like others by Mia Couto, features several deep and interlinking themes: fantastical events among everyday reality, halfway stages between life and death, voices from the dead that gradually reveal hidden truths, the surge of a crude modernity at the expense of traditional African identity.

There are also a host of characters and relatives with marvellously suggestive names like Miserinha, Mariavilhosa, and the two aunts Abstinência and Admiração. Many have varying views on grandfather's death. Some represent different aspects of Mozambique, such as Último, a business-dealing, politically-connected and rather sleazy uncle who symbolises the urban face of Mozambique that has become disconnected from the rural traditions of the island. Último contrasts starkly with his brother, Mariano's father, an ex-guerilla, now withdrawn and disillusioned with the world. All play key roles in the novel.

The twin themes of disenchantment and the abandonment of authentic values feature strongly in the book. You might suppose that Couto had become disillusioned with the outcome of the liberation struggle, but his view is more subtle. In an interview three years ago (*Isto é*, Brazil,

26/09/2007), he said that, as a member of Frelimo in opposition, he thought that “the conquest of power would be the end of power – in the sense that everyone would have power” and quotes an un-named Frelimo poet: “It is not enough that our cause is pure and just – purity and justice has to exist within us”. He adds that many political leaders lacked this, even though he recognised that “those in power have to enter a management logic where it is difficult to see where are the boundaries between the betrayal of principles and adapting to the real world”. This suggests a continuing struggle within Couto, which will likely continue to provide rich material for future novels from an original and authentic writer and his quest for the literary construction of Mozambican identity.

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