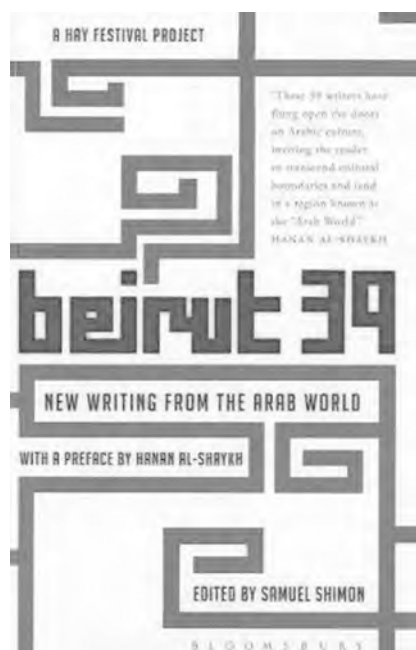


achieved some recognition both within and beyond the region.



There is Lebanese chick-lit, hardboiled Sudanese noir, a touching look at Saudi social stratification, and a dizzying magical-realist spin on Druze theology. One Iraqi author gives a nod to Mary Shelley in a horrific but intriguing literary response to that country's ongoing strife and conflict, wherein a deranged scrap collector pieces together a body from the scattered bits of bomb victims littering Baghdad's streets. The openly-gay Abdallah Taia violates one social taboo after another with his tale of a young Moroccan man awakening to his homosexuality while watching a homoerotic French film next to his sleeping mother. Following the proverb that humour is the greatest weapon, Wajdi al Ahdal brandishes his pen like a rapier against 'the Man' in a story of crime and corruption in the heart of the Yemeni capital.

There are several standouts in this anthology. One of these is an excerpt from Rabee Jaber's novel *America*, in which a Levantine infantryman is the hero of a very Western confrontation, fighting for the Americans during the First World War. Shortlisted for the 2010 'Arab Booker' prize, the as-yet

untranslated novel explores the lives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Syrian immigrants whose contributions to and successful integration into American society remain largely overlooked.

Another is a witty tale of precocious Libyan schoolchildren, set amidst the ashen remains of a state-sanctioned bonfire of foreign books. Sent to clean up the mess, instead the children get swept up into a dispute over the purported nationality of a local water spirit. While the children's logic threatens to produce an international tempest in a teapot, this mirthful mockery of jingoism and casual brutality decries the petty and superficial prejudices that can plague the region.

A third is Randa Jarrar's poignant narrative of a Palestinian girl's fear and loss of innocence, closely modelled on Isaac Babel's *Story of my Dovecote*, which describes the ruthless pogroms the Russian émigré witnessed as a boy, here leading up to the bitter irony of the destruction of the child's home by the Israeli Army.

If by reading the literature of another land we may come to understand it a little bit more, then *Beirut 39* presents thirty-nine opportunities to encounter and appreciate the diversity of the region. Never intentionally seeking to explain the Middle East to outsiders, these works illuminate instead by immersing readers in the vivid textures and manifold ways of living, in what Lebanese writer Hala Kawtharani describes as 'that part of the world where the sun gleams darkly' (93). Like the blossoming youth culture from which they spring, these stories challenge western assumptions as much as their own societies' hypocrisies.

Arab publishers are already tapping into this explosion of young talent in their midst; whether or not their Anglophone colleagues will do the same, much less before some of these writers reach middle age, is another story entirely.

Mithu Banerji

Sharmilla, and Other Portraits

Elleke Boehmer

Jacana, Johannesburg, 2010, pb
177pp ISBN 1 7700 9810 7 £10.95
www.jacana.co.za

Jewels and Other Stories

Dawn Promislow

Tsar Publications, Toronto, 2010, pb
104pp ISBN 1 8947 7065 1 \$20.95
www.tsarbooks.com

In the epilogue to her collection of short stories *Sharmilla, and Other Portraits*, Elleke Boehmer writes about her situation as a 'non-English writer in English'. Born in South Africa but having lived in England over the past couple of decades, Boehmer is now Professor of world literature at the University of Oxford and has been known as a meticulous narrator of the lives of South African men and women. Her first novel *Screens Against the Sky* was shortlisted for the David Higham Prize in 1991 and her third novel, *Bloodlines*, was shortlisted for the Sanlam Literary Award in 2001. *Sharmilla, and Other Portraits* is her first collection of short stories.

Boehmer admits that the stories in this collection have emerged from her 'out of language condition' which is a particular condition not unusual to the postcolonial writer. In the epilogue, which is demonstrative of both her academic and creative prowess, Boehmer defines some of the complexities of this 'peculiarly linguistic orphanhood' which has consequently been the wellspring of her creative output. Her situation, she asserts, 'was strengthened by the uneasiness of racialised identity' in apartheid South Africa when she was growing up and led to her 'living in translation, on a borderline'. Yet, it was this very sense of 'unhomeliness' intensified by her father's decision to speak only English

at home and then by Boehmer's own 'shifts within and across the English-speaking world' that helped to put her 'back into translation'.

In this collection of emotionally lucid stories, Boehmer is at her lyrical best and has optimised her 'translated' perspective. The seventeen stories are a series of graceful portraits of men, women and children, writers, politicians and domestic workers and all their social and domestic entanglements confined to an otherwise fast changing South Africa. Whether it is the portrait of a female escort and her impressions of a mysterious client in the eponymous story 'Sharmilla' or about a husband in 'The Father Antenna' who, conscious of his wife's agonising homesickness, makes an effort to bring the music of her hometown in the Netherlands to South Africa, Boehmer uses her inimitable narrative voice to the strengths of traditional pragmatism with the vigorous objectivity of postmodernist writing.

Read chronologically, the stories move from childhood memories of life in South Africa (in 'Khaya', 'The Father Antenna', 'Mrs Wedlake', 'Off-white' and 'The Bean-bag Race') to middle-aged disillusionment in 'Highveld Hibiscus Garden' and then later the tortuous duality of a displaced existence in 'Sharmilla' and 'Zulu Speaking'. A compassionate articulateness characterises Boehmer's short fiction and even her most unsophisticated characters are multidimensional. For example, in the opening story of the collection, 'Khaya', Boehmer skilfully portrays the growing curiosity of a young girl who finds herself appreciating the 'damp and cool' of the maid's quarters she secretly visits during her school holidays. Told from the child's point of view, the narrative divulges the obvious physical contrasts between the lives of

her own family in their larger house and the simplicity of the existence of the black servant. As the girl observes the differences in the grooming and toilette of her mother and Eileen the maid, she expresses a seemingly harmless curiosity about colour and skin and various differing body shapes. When she innocently persists in encouraging Eileen to expose her enormous bosom to her she does not realise that, in her agreeing to do this, Eileen feels ashamed by the act: 'I looked up at her face, which was turned over to the side. Her eyes, staring open, and her mouth puckered tight with something more than anger' (6). Eileen's 'more than anger' in the face of her own submissiveness shows how Boehmer is able to draw on the complexities of social and racial existence in South Africa. This particular story ends with an uneasy yet not unsympathetic observation about boundaries that are established by a child's observations of racial difference. This deft fusion of the emotional and the matter-of-fact remains a foremost characteristic of most of the stories in this collection.

Dawn Promislow's *Jewel and Other Stories* is also set in South Africa. Promislow was born and raised in Johannesburg and then moved to Canada. As with Boehmer's 'life in translation', Promislow's collection seems to have emerged from her early impressions of the land where she was born, although the dual perspective of her South African-Canadian identity yields a unique authorial voice.

Promislow's stories are neat and detailed sketches of the lives of men and women challenged by the complexities of apartheid and the resulting imbalance in the social and economic structure of South Africa. Her stories weave a delicate thread of

observations which reveal the ugly chasm created by apartheid and at the same time offer an unusually penetrating insight into otherwise disregarded lives. For example, the opening story of the collection 'Pool', about a young black domestic worker called Ficksen whose quiet existence on the periphery of a young girl's life goes almost unnoticed until he is found dead in his employer's pool, presents a voyeuristic view of both the servant and the white family as they live their separate lives within the same close confines. In 'Jewels', a young girl Carol is fascinated by her nanny's brown skin, 'smooth and glossy as polished stone'. She finds herself trying to help the nanny who pines for her children left behind in the countryside. When Carol's mother finds out about her gesture, faced by her mother's disapproving silence, she realises that 'she was not powerful, as she had thought. She could not with her limp hands, create the world in her image after all' (9). This story, similar in its theme to Boehmer's 'Khaya', is evidence of the searching questions which both authors ask about the dense and sinister but also mundane traces of racial discrimination.

Whilst Promislow's collection does not yet bear the intensity and maturity of Boehmer's writing, stories like 'Billy', 'Secret' and 'Bottle' (in which two black nannies bottle sea water as keepsakes) are skilfully fashioned, and the informal freshness of Promislow's voice and vision lends itself perceptively to the short story form. In the discerning characterisation and evocative portrayal of a fast-changing country and the sensitivity with which they touch upon apartheid and the intimate personal struggles faced by people, both Boehmer's and Promislow's collections are certainly not to be overlooked.

Corrigendum

'Families in Flux: Transnational Reconnections Across the Horn of Africa and Its Diaspora' by Christine Matzke
Volume 26, number 3 (Issue 67 Summer 2011): 74–78

On page 77, Wole Soyinka's novel should be noted as *Ìsarà: A Voyage Around 'Essay'* and the author's name, Nadifa Mohamed was incorrectly printed as Mohammed.

On page 78, it incorrectly states that Jama signs on to the *Exodus 1947*. In fact the ship is the *Runnymede Park* which takes the passengers of the *Exodus 1947*. It also incorrectly states that the name of Jama's wife is Kunama, when in fact she belongs to the Kunama people.

Wasafiri wishes to apologise to the reviewer for these errors.