

Chris Abani. *Song for Night* (Scribe Publications, 2008)

The idea of the child soldier is at battle with the Western romantic notion of childhood innocence. It threatens the ideal of a nurturing environment in which a child's potential is cultivated and developed, and is therefore as unpalatable as the subject of a novel as it is in reality. However, in many countries, to this day, the child soldier *is* an abhorrent reality and there have been several novels dealing with their plight published in the last few years – novels such as Uzodinma Iweala's award-winning *Beasts of No Nation*, Ishmael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone*, and Dave Egger's *What is the What*, based on the memories of a real life child soldier.

Although some children volunteer as soldiers, often when there is nowhere else to turn, many are abducted and forced to kill – even to kill their own family members. Most are beaten, traumatised, drugged, brutalised and raped. A novel based on the experiences of a child soldier is one that can draw upon and explore a wide range of human and inhuman situations and responses, and closely examine the darker elements of human nature and suffering.

Song for Night is Chris Abani's fifth work of fiction and has recently been awarded the PEN/Beyond Margins Award 2008. He has also published four collections of poetry and received several awards for his writing. Abani was born in Nigeria in 1966, a year before the Biafran war, and has served time as a political prisoner in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Currently, he resides in the United States and is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of California.

Song for Night is a first-person narrative, which begins with the words 'What you hear is not my voice' (1). This is an interesting beginning as it both acknowledges the reader and assumes that the reader 'hears' a voice as s/he reads the written narrative, while also foreshadowing the revelation that the main character has no voice. It is also doubtful, given the circumstances of the boy's existence, that the narrative is actually written; there is no reference to a diary or writing implements, or to a motivation for recording events as there often is with a first person / epistolary novel. It is just the voice / no voice that reflects on memories and recounts scenes. In fact, rather unusually, confirming that the narrative is not written, we are told:

Of course if you are hearing any of this at all it's because you have gained access to my head. You would also know then that my inner-speech is not in English, because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo. (3)

The effect is disconcerting, as is the extensive vocabulary demonstrated by the voiceless My Luck who is only 15 years old and has not attended school for at least three years. The reader is asked to believe that s/he is listening to the interior monologue in Igbo. This isn't an easy position for a reader to accept.

Book reviews: 'Song for Night' by Chris Abani. Debra Zott.
Transnational Literature Volume 1 no. 1 November 2008.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

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For three years My Luck has been a soldier in an unnamed war, working as a mine diffuser with a platoon of equally young and voiceless comrades. Chosen because they are light and less likely to set off the land mines, the young mine diffusers have had their vocal cords severed to prevent them from screaming if they, or one of the other soldiers, accidentally detonate a mine. The soldiers need to communicate, however, so they have invented a system of signs and actions – a basic language of hand signals, facial expressions and movements, which provide the headings for each chapter. For example, ‘Silence is a steady hand, palm flat’, ‘Death is two fingers sliding across the throat’, ‘Cowardice is spitting once’ and ‘Music is any dance you can pull off’.

My Luck is separated from his platoon following an explosion and the novella follows his search to find them. The story begins as My Luck slowly regains consciousness and begins to explain to the reader about the nature of his work, making the narrative seem implausible and disconnected from the trauma and urgency of his situation. For example,

Let me explain something, which on the surface might sound illogical but isn't. We all lay land mines, the rebels and the federal troops, us and the enemy, but we do it in such a hurry that no one bothers to map these land mine sites, no one remembers where they are. (5)

Another troubling aspect of the story is that My Luck had a girlfriend, a fellow mine-diffuser, Ijeoma, who was killed a year earlier at the age of fourteen. Teenagers do of course have sexual experiences but the lovemaking between My Luck and Ijeoma occurs a short time after My Luck has been forced by his commanding officer to rape a woman. The scene is described with tenderness, in stark contrast to the rape, but a later description seems more fitting to describe the lovemaking of a mature couple: ‘Ijeoma and I made desperate love, crying as we came, but we did it to make sure that amongst all that horror, there was still love’ (66).

Song for Night is a disturbing book, which is likely to leave horrific images playing on the reader's mind. Despite the ghastly descriptions of death and depravity (or desperation), the language of the novel is actually quite beautiful, with a lyrical quality, once it moves away from the explanatory tone used in the early chapters. The reader is likely to feel disoriented as the journey shifts from physical to spiritual, with a good dose of the archetypal, weaving memory with a dream-like state, and questioning what is real. In essence, *Song for Night* is a journey and a crossing over, brought to a close with a familiar metaphor.

For a child soldier story with a more authentic feel try Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* told by the young soldier Agu in a believable patois with an intense immediacy.

Debra Zott

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