

**Nyarota, G. (2006). *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsmen*. Cape Town: Zebra Press. ISBN: 1770071121**

**Reviewed by Jephias Mapuva**

Nyarota encapsulates three episodes which define the content of this book, namely; his contribution to the cause of the liberation struggle; endeavors to stifle media freedoms in Zimbabwe (the confession by his would-be assassin, the bombing of the Daily News printing press) and the closure of the media house; and the author's subsequent flight into exile after increased death threats and possible arrest under new media laws that had been enacted specifically to gag independent newspapers in the country. These are the three episodes which the author attempts to present to the readership in greater detail. However, the casual nature with which the Nyarota puts across some of these life-threatening and chilling events and developments is unbelievable and at the same time appeals to the readers' emotions and forces the readership to sympathize with him as a defenseless individual armed only with his pen against gun-totting security agents all vying for his blood.

In this book, Nyarota majestically traces how the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), which was the liberation movement that brought political independence to Zimbabwe and has ruled the country with an iron fist for almost three decades, nobly executed the liberation struggle, eventually earning the role of a liberator, to how the same political party deteriorated into a demagogic caricature characterized by corruption, democratic, and economic decay.

The author presents further a chronicle of events that connect the liberation struggle to post-independence developments. In his expose, Nyarota captures the picturesque metamorphosis of ZANU PF as a liberation movement, much cherished by all and sundry, to the chagrin of whites who had conducted the colonial dispensation. What makes the book a cut above the rest and most interesting is the author's ability to write in the second person yet referring to self, thereby creating an impression of no egocentrism in sharp contrast to a situation where he would have used the first person. Readers usually sympathize with those who humble themselves; hence the author is able to achieve this aspect in his writing of his personal experiences.

The book is an authentic and real-life story of a journalist who narrates his own personal experiences mainly as a journalist. The author chronicles events leading to the curtailment of freedoms of expression, assembly, association and movement, among others. Nyarota's book would draw readership from as far afield as legal practitioners, journalists, politicians, academics as well as ordinary readers who would derive much interest in the development of media curtailment in post-colonial Zimbabwe. For those into satire, the book is a case study of how the revolution ate one of its own, especially given the background role that Geoffrey Nyarota played during the liberation struggle to secure clothing for the freedom fighters, with a hair-raising episode having been his journey to the capital to buy jeans clothing for the freedom fighters, risking his

life by passing through closely monitored road-blocks. It is a book that would court the wrath of any despotic regime, as among its strengths is its propensity to expose corruption among politicians

*Against the Grain: Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsmen* portrays politicians as a lot that easily forget their promises to the general populace. In this case Nyarota exposes how the very politicians, who masqueraded as being guided by the Leadership Code that prohibited self-enrichment and amassing of wealth and the expense of the ordinary people, breach the very code of conduct that they were supposed to safeguard, even the ink with which the code was written had dried up. The book presents human rights abuses of grand magnitude, especially at a time when the gullible masses, fresh from the liberation struggle held politicians in high esteem.

Nyarota's chronological description of political, economic and social developments that were obtained from the 1990s right up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are detailed, articulate and unprecedented as the author left nothing to chance and mentioned any detail that mattered to his readership irrespective of the sensitivity of the information. What makes Nyarota a cut above most of his contemporaries is his meticulous attention to detail and his daring nature which most journalists dared not to show in the face of political demagogues and existing prohibitive political conditions at the time.

The author's description of events that unfolded during his tenure at both public and independent newspapers are both picturesque and vivid, while his employment of analytical prowess is one of the best from a newsman not used to producing literary works. This makes the book a classical testimony of how a revolution can eat one of its own. Nyarota's employment of the retrogression technique spices up his works as the reader is able to acquaint him/her with the development of events, thereby making the reader closer to the action and in some cases, part of the action. The author is also able to play around with the readers' emotions from pain, joy, and suspense, all in one piece of writing. Nyarota's work is suitable for readers of all ages. For the mature reader, the author brings on board nostalgic memories, fanfare and pomp with which people of Zimbabwe received the news of political independence. In some instances, Nyarota elevates himself, through his unbelievable escapades, to the status of Ian Fleming's legendary .007 James Bond in which the author survives by the skin of his teeth in many cases. Again this appeals mainly to the mature readership. For the youthful readers, the good news are those pertaining to the revelation of scandalous and corrupt practices of politicians resulting in some shaming themselves and one committing suicide unable to face the nation. For the very young reader, Nyarota's chronicles herald a turndown of the economy and the diminishing of political spaces as exhibited by the enactment of restrictive legislation that curtailed citizen and media freedoms.

Nyarota applies a bizarre way of writing by taking the reader down memory lane, from the happenings of the liberation struggle, the pomp and fanfare with which Zimbabweans embraced political independence and the metamorphic and proverbial democratic decay which turned Zimbabweans into destitute who had sacrificed and invested so much energy in the liberation struggle.

His writing style is akin to the Shakespearian style where in telling a story, where the author threads backwards to facilitate better comprehension. In his book, Nyarota scores a first by not only being one of the first journalists in post-colonial Zimbabwe to narrate his personal experiences at the hands of a despotic regime, but manages to stand up against repressive media legislation that had been intended to curtail media freedom in the country. Nyarota's causal narrations of harrowing encounters with death are so conspicuous and rare that in some instances, it would seem as though he is telling a fairy tale. His encounter, with a would-be assassin, is not only tantalizing, but hair-raising and a panacea for a regime committed to seeing media freedom being curtailed through intimidation. What further makes Nyarota a unique and a mystique in a book where he is the sole protagonist is that he never got arrested like some of his contemporary journalists who had gone into exile for fear of further victimization, although he eventually does the same.

Consequently, Nyarota's recognition by the Oxford-based Numen Foundation for accolades for his sterling work in media circles is testimony to his depth in media coverage and investigative journalism, which in my opinion is justifiable.

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