

**Aké** gives a fascinating picture of a society that has many common elements with a Western society, and many elements that are quite different. Morality and immorality are seen to be human attributes, and Nigerian morality, as seen in this story of Wole's home, is as stern and as humane as it is anywhere in the world. There is however one respect in which the Nigerian society differed from our own South African society. Although Nigeria was then a British colony, Wole's father Essay held a high and dignified position in the community; in South Africa his status would have been considerably less dignified. Essay's wife, the Wild Christian, and Daodu's wife Beere, were strong and independent characters, and it would

appear that they enjoyed a degree of independence unknown to many Black South African women. The closing pages of **Aké** concern the women's demonstrations before the ruler's palace, protesting against women's taxes, the behaviour of police and officials, and the corruptness of the administration. There can be little doubt that these strongly held views on human freedom were passed on to the small boy, who as a man and a writer was later subjected to imprisonment and detention by his own modern Nigerian government.

People often ask me if I can recommend a good book. Well today I can. I recommend Wole Soyinka's **Aké**, the story of his first eleven years. It is intensely readable, funny, serious, and splendid. □

by M J DAYMOND

## CONTROLLING VOICES

A review of **ADVANCE RETREAT** by Richard Rive : David Philip, Cape Town 1983  
R14.85 excl.

Although Richard Rive is one of South Africa's internationally better known black writers, not much of his work has appeared in his own country. If the intention in publishing *Advance, Retreat* was to make Rive's stories better known here, then it is a pity that four of the stories currently in print in *Selected Writing* (Ad Donker, 1977) should reappear in this present volume of twelve stories. Also, if this volume is intended as a representative collection, then it is a pity that the date of each story's first appearance is not given. The volume has been generously illustrated by Cecil Skotnes. It is pleasing to see a publisher using the talents of a local painter in this way; perhaps David Philip's example will encourage other publishers to do the same.

The collection shows Rive to be an ambitious writer who undertakes an impressive range of subject matters and narrative modes. Range is important for, as Ahmed Essop has said in a collection of statements in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing* (Natal University Press, in press), what the South African writer has to protect above all is the capacity to be many-voiced:



Richard Rive

Under the pressure of a crushing social reality . . . The writer may reduce himself to the level of the secretary, the journalist, the zealot, the demagogue . . . To be many-voiced . . . is not easy . . . But I believe that the creative imagination reveals perceptions and truths that are not otherwise discoverable . . .

Sometimes Rive's stories attain a many-voiced power to reveal otherwise undiscoverable truths; sometimes they don't. "The Bench" demonstrates the difficulties. It dramatises the first moments of political awareness in Karlie as he sheds the teachings of Ou Klaas that all races must accept their different, God-given places in

society. At a rally in Cape Town, Karlie encounters speakers who preach and practice equality; he is stirred by what he hears and seeks to make his own gesture of protest by sitting on a 'Whites Only' bench at a railway station until he is arrested by the police. The moment and the gesture are real enough, but Rive's grasp of Karlie's developing awareness is not secure. It is hard to believe that a man who has only just met the concept of equality should respond to the bench like this:

For a moment it symbolised all the misery of South African society. Here was his challenge to his rights as a man. Here it stood. A perfectly ordinary wooden bench like hundreds of others all over South Africa.

Karlie is made to place the ordinariness of the bench with a geographical sweep which a country boy recently arrived in the city is unlikely to command. Similarly, his recognition of what the bench symbolises carries in its phrasing years of bitter political recognitions — it is not that of the novice. Rive has allowed his writing to become "secretary" to a reductive political purpose. His response as a man to the crushing South African reality impedes his grasp as a writer of his subject.

The issue is not that of a simple opposition between political purposes and an unfettered imagination, for South African writing must document political realities so as to counteract the official view. Literature is one of the means by which people can awaken to their real interests and experience. "The Bench" is known world-wide because it undertakes to do this, but it is not Rive at his best as a story-teller for it fails in what can be the unique achievement of such a fiction — to allow each reader to share in the particular processes of Karlie's awakening resolve.

Discoveries possible only through the many-voiced imagination are, however, made in stories like "Riva" and "The Visits". In "Riva" an ugly, middle-aged Jewish woman meets Paul, an impatient, insecure young 'coloured' student (In "Advance Retreat", Rive has fun with this same embarrassed scrupulosity of using inverted commas.) They dislike each other — or rather, Paul dislikes her triumphant demands for attention and her pathos for reasons which are not articulated but which are all there in the action. Rive has captured the meeting of two kinds of racial suffering and their competing claims so well that the story has a power to disturb beyond words. "The Visits" too captures what cannot be stated without introducing the reductions of the single voice. Its subject matter is guilt, but to label it is to lift it into our known world in a way which misses how it actually works in our lives. The actual workings are just what Rive, at his unfettered best, can create.

Contradictory as it may seem, Rive is many-voiced when he uses a narrating or perceiving persona close to his own being. His autobiography, *Writing Black*, shows that he is a fine *raconteur* who delights in ironies which operate partly against him. It is perhaps in this delight that some understanding can be found of how a narration held within the limits of his personal experience can reveal general truths. South Africans have to be very good at ironies — at living within them if not at perceiving them — and our short story writers have established a powerful line of narrators who are only partly in control of the contradictions they handle. This is Bosman's particular gift to our literature. When Rive follows the story-telling inclinations of his autobiography, he stands securely in this line. Thus, when Rive retains his hold on the complexities of one character's way of experiencing, he succeeds in speaking for many lives and in giving us truths that are "not otherwise discoverable". □

#### AMONG OUR CONTRIBUTORS

**Jill Arnott** — Lecturer in English, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

**Norman Bromberger** — Senior Lecturer in Economics, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

**Peter Colenbrander** — Senior Lecturer in History; University of South Africa.

**M.J. Daymond** — Senior Lecturer in English, University of Natal, Durban.

**Philip van Niekerk** — Political correspondent, Rand Daily Mail.

**Alan Paton** — Distinguished South African Author, former chairman of the South African Liberal Party.

**David Unterhalter** — Lecturer in the School of Law, University of the Witwatersrand.

**Anne Raynal** — M.B., Ch.B.; D.P.H.; M.Sc.Com. Health Dev. Countries, at present in Namibia.