



## Tram 83 by Fiston Mwanza Mujila

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on September 14, 2015

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**Tram 83 by Fiston Mwanza Mujila (tr. Roland Glasser). Deep Vellum Publishing. 200 pages, \$14.95.**

For a country as vast as it is, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has not produced much literature. (Ruthless oppression and exploitation will have that effect.) *Tram 83* may not be a novel in the usual sense—it is more of a francophone triumph of style over substance—but it is a welcome voice from that quarter, and a promise of lively works to come.

As the book begins, a young man named Requiem waits at a decrepit railway station for his old friend Lucien to arrive. Requiem and Lucien haven't seen each other in years. A woman named Jacqueline once came between them in some never-explained way.

Lucien is the prototypical starving artist, dressed in black and furiously at work on his play, which a contact in Paris has promised to produce. Requiem writes a bit too, but he also makes introductions (he's a pimp), moves "merchandise" (he's a drug dealer, or maybe a smuggler), and exercises leverage over foreigners with the use of compromising photos (he's a blackmailer).

Requiem's most attractive quality is his genuine enthusiasm for the hookers who congregate in a nightclub called Tram 83. "Your thighs have the allure of a vodka bottle," he tells one, and he gets incensed at Lucien for his indifference to the pleasures on offer.

Structured more around refrains than it is around plot, *Tram 83* is as much a musical work as it is a fictional one. The most frequent refrain is "Do you have the time?," the come-on repeated by the baby-chicks, single-mamas, and other carefully delineated species of hookerdom who pass their days and nights at Tram 83.

The most literal meaning of the phrase—do you know what time it is?—is also the least logical, since neither the hookers nor the nightclub drinkers show much concern with punctuality. "Do you have the time?" could also mean "Do you have time for a quickie?" Or more philosophically (this is a novel in French, after all), "Do you have a grip on your particular corner of the space-time continuum?"

Everything in *Tram 83* seems to take place in the present, and time and history are scrambled together. The hookers adopt names from the past like Bessie Smith, Marilyn Monroe, and Simone de Beauvoir (!). Lucien the playwright, the closest thing this book has to a hero, throws together figures like Che Guevara, Gandhi, and Lincoln on a single stage.

Like the International Zone of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, *Tram 83* takes place in a special enclave—in its country but not of it, subject to its own rules, breathing its own atmosphere. The “City-State” where the nightclub does business is a patch of territory surrounding the capital of an unnamed country that is clearly the Democratic Republic of the Congo: formerly Zaire, formerly the Belgian Congo. A rebellion led by a character known as “the dissident General” controls the City-State, and its inhabitants regard the “pointlessly vast” expanse outside its borders as the “Back-Country.”

Not a great deal happens in this short book. A Swiss publisher turns up, offering Lucien the promise of fame and fortune. There's a man named Mortal Combat, less dramatic than his name, and a *femme fatale* named *Émilienne*. But what does happen happens with great energy, thanks to the drive and inventiveness of the language. Fiston Mwanza Mujila isn't the first author to write dialogue that interrupts other dialogue, but he is noteworthy in having dialogue that breaks into the narration itself for half a page at a time.

The narrator himself promises at first to be a feisty character in his own right, offering caustic asides such as “Jackals don't eat jackals” and “The survival instinct isn't something you learn.” He begins the book in Godlike tones, pronouncing “In the beginning was the stone,” and continuing with a paragraph of small-cap text that introduces each chapter in the manner of Cervantes or Fielding.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STONE, AND THE STONE PROMPTED OWNERSHIP, AND OWNERSHIP CAUSED A RUSH, AND THE RUSH BROUGHT AN INFLUX OF MEN OF DIVERSE APPEARANCE WHO BUILT RAILROADS THROUGH THE ROCK, FORGED A LIFE OF PALM WINE, AND DEVISED A SYSTEM, A MIXTURE OF MINING AND TRADING.

Who are these inhabitants and how do they spend their days? The narrator explains in a Whitmanesque torrent of second-person address:

The City-State is one of those territories that have already broken through the barrier of internal suffering. You share the same destiny as everyone else, the same history, the same hardship, the same trains, the same rot, the same Tram beer, the same dog kebabs, the same plot as soon as you come into the world. You start out baby-chick or slim-jim or child soldier. You graduate to endlessly striking student or desperado ... If you've got family on the trains, then you work on the trains, otherwise, like a ship, you wash up on the edge of hope, a suicidal, a carjacker, a digger with dirty teeth, a mechanic, a street sleeper, a commission agent, an errand boy employed by for-profit tourists, a hawker of secondhand coffins. . . . Your fate is already sealed like that of the locomotives carrying spoiled merchandise and the dying.

Soon after Requiem meets Lucien at the train station, however, the narrator gradually fades away as a character and the story proceeds in an intimate third-person that takes the reader inside some desperate and intriguing minds. *Tram 83* is not exactly a deep novel, but it carries itself with exuberance and style.

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa* and the editor of *African Lives: An Anthology of Memoirs and Autobiographies*. His next book, *Thoreau's Wildflowers*, will be published by Yale University Press in the spring of 2016.

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