

# Difficult Terrain

A Zimbabwean moves to Detroit in NoViolet Bulawayo's novel.

BY UZODINMA IWUALA

WHAT do Detroit, Mich., and a town in Zimbabwe called Paradise have in common? For Darling, the narrator of NoViolet Bulawayo's striking first novel, "We Need New Names," the answer is almost nothing — except they're places she has lived.

Darling's corner of Zimbabwe, which

## WE NEED NEW NAMES

By NoViolet Bulawayo  
296 pp. A Riverman Arthur Books/  
Little, Brown & Company, \$25.

she prowls with a mischievous gang of children called *Bastard*, *Chipso*, *Godknows*, *Sibho* and *Silma*, is a study in contrasts, turning each day into an adventure. There is Darling's Paradise, a collection of shacks whose residents have been beaten down by a hard life in a country with little concern for the small man. Then there is *Budapest*, a neighboring community where whites and rich Africans live in big, solid houses with all the amenities of the industrialized world. Its guava trees prove impossibly tempting to Darling and her friends, who steal the fruit both to feed their hunger and to enjoy a thrill, if fleeting, sense of power.

As they roam between these neighborhoods, Darling and her friends engage in a childlike but painfully insightful dialogue about life on the global margins. Their world isn't the poverty-stricken Africa of the old stereotypes, a place whose people know nothing more than the bounds of their own deprivation. It is, instead, a place where the villagers secretly mock the oblivious white NGO workers who have come to "save them," where the Chinese have arrived speaking the language of money, where the AIDS epidemic takes on an almost mundane feel in the person of Darling's father. Just another migrant worker returning from what he thought would be a better life in South Africa, he suffers his illness in the privacy of his own home. Darling's friends find her family's shame unremarkable.

Bulawayo's portrayal of Zimbabwe is notable not by its descriptions of Paradise and Budapest but for those of Darling's interior landscape — when, for example, she compares camera-toting NGO workers snapping pictures of her friends to paparazzi harassing Paris Hilton, or when she observes that in Zimbabwe you need to be a grandfather to be president, unlike America's youthful Obama. Sometimes Darling is afraid of her world, which can be both disgusting and beguiling, but she is sure of her place in it.

Uzodinma Iweala is the author of a novel, "Beasts of No Nation."

Bulawayo describes all this in brilliant language, alive and confident, often funny, strong in its ability to make Darling's African life immediate without resorting to the kind of preaching meant to remind Western readers that African stories are universal, our local characters globalized, our literature moving beyond the postcolonial into what the novelist Taiye Selasi has best characterized as Afropolitan.

But then there is "Destroyedmichygon," where the teenage Darling finds herself in the care of her Zimbabwean aunt, the common-law wife of a Ghanaian man whose son from another woman — an obese boy dressed in sagging pants, obsessed with video games — seems to have imbibed the worst of American youth culture. Here the novel descends into tripe observations about the oddest of snow, the sound of punches, the clash of cultures when a skinny Zimbabwean marries a grossly fat American in order to get immigration papers. Here is there a predictable pride-meets-privilege showdown when Darling encounters the anorexic daughter of a man whose house she cleans.

The more Darling becomes an American, the less vibrant Bulawayo's writing becomes. When Darling and her Nigerian and African-American girlfriends watch pornography online, we get a mechanical catalog of sex acts that pales in comparison with the wrenching discussion that appears earlier in the book when Darling and two friends in Paradise try to help a friend get rid of the baby she is carrying, the child of her own grandfather. And yet, despite the course of the fatter half of the novel, Bulawayo is clearly a gifted writer. She demonstrates a striking ability to capture the uneasiness that accompanies a newcomer's arrival in America, to illuminate how the reinvention of the self in a new place confronts the protective memory of the way things were back home. □



NoViolet Bulawayo

# Realities of Race

Being black, in America and Africa, draws a novelist's scrutiny.

BY MIKE PEED

WHAT'S the difference between an African-American and an American-African? From such a distinction springs a deep-seated discussion of race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel, "Americanah." Adichie, born in Nigeria but now living both in her homeland and in the United States, is an extraordinarily self-aware thinker and writer, possessing the ability to lambaste society without sneering or patronizing or polemicizing. For her, it seems no great feat to balance high-literary intentions with broad social critique. "Americanah" examines blackness in



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

## AMERICANAH

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie  
477 pp. Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95.

America, Nigeria and Britain, but it's also a steady-handed dissection of the universal human experience — a platitude made fresh by the accuracy of Adichie's observations.

So an African-American is a black person from long generational lines in the United States, most likely with slave ancestors. She might write poetry about "Mother Africa," but she's pleased to be from a country that gives international aid rather than from one that receives it. An American-African is an African newly emigrated to the United States. In her native country, she didn't realize she was *black* — she lit that description only after she landed in America. In college, the African-American joins the Black Student Union, while the American-African signs up with the African Students Association.

Adichie understands that such fine-grained differentiations don't penetrate the minds of many Americans. This is why a lot of people here, when thinking of race and class, instinctively speak of "riches and poor" or "poor blacks and poor whites." Many of Adichie's best observations regard nuances of language. When people are reluctant to say "racist," they say "racially charged." The phrase "beautiful woman," when enunciated in certain tones by certain haughty white women, undoubtedly means "ordinary-looking black woman." Adichie's characters aren't, in fact, black. They're "ashie" or "gingerbread" or "caramel." Sometimes their skin is so dark it has "an underdone of blueberries." "Americanah" tells the story of a smart, strong-willed Nigerian woman named Ifemelu who, after she leaves Africa for America, endures several harrowing years of near destitution before graduating from college, starting a blog entitled

"Racecetero or Various Observations About America, Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" and winning a fellowship at Princeton (as Adichie once did; she has acknowledged that many of Ifemelu's experiences are her own). Ever hovering in Ifemelu's thoughts is her high school boyfriend, Obinze, an equally intelligent if gentler, more self-effacing Nigerian, who outstays his visa and takes illegal jobs in London. (When Obinze trips and falls to the ground, a co-worker shouts, "His knee is bad because he's a knee-grower!")

Ifemelu and Obinze represent a new kind of immigrant, "raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction." They aren't fleeing war or starvation but "the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness." Where Obinze falls — soon enough, he is deported — Ifemelu thrives, in part because she seeks authenticity. Never has Ifemelu felt as free as the day she stops hiding her Nigerian accent under an American one, the accent that convinces telemarketers she is white. She refuses to straighten her hair (a favorite Web site is HappilyKinlyNappy.com), even if she must endure mottled disparagements from African-Americans when out with a white man — "You ever wonder why he likes you looking all jungle like that?"

Early on, a horrific event leaves Ifemelu reeling, and years later, when she returns to Nigeria, she's still haunted by it. Meantime, back in Lagos, Obinze has found wealth as a property developer. Though the book threatens to morph into a simple story of their reunion, it stretches into a scalding assessment of Nigeria, a country too proud to have patience for "Americanahs" — big shots who return from abroad to belittle their countrymen — and yet one that, *sometimes* unwittingly, endures foreign values. (Of the water scenery in a school's Christmas pageant, a parent asks, "Are they teaching children that a Christmas is not a real Christmas unless snow falls like it does abroad?")

"Americanah" is wittingly trenchant and lucrily empathetic, both worldly and geographically precise, a novel that holds the disconcerting realities of our times fearlessly before us. It never feels false. □

Mike Peed is on the editorial staff of the *Sunday Review* section of *The Times*.