



Student Profile

★ NOVUYO TSHUMA, PhD candidate ★



In her first year in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program, Novuyo Rosa Tshuma has already accomplished the extraordinary: international major press publication. Her novel, *The House of Stone*, is forthcoming with W.W. Norton in the USA, and Atlantic Books in the United Kingdom. Novuyo, a native of Zimbabwe, holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her first collection, *Shadows*, was published to critical acclaim in 2013 by Kwela in South Africa, and awarded the 2014 Herman Charles Bosman Prize.

What and who inspired you to write?

My earliest exposure to jotting things down was through the art of letter writing. My father and I would exchange letters when I was a child – he lived and worked in Rome and I only saw him about once a year during the holidays. So we got into that routine. Waiting by the postbox for the postman became one of my favorite pastimes. I was also a bookish kid and grew up in a family that encouraged reading.

This is your first year at UH. What made you interested in the program, and how has the transition been so far?

I'm interested in strengthening my intellectual and creative writing interests, and the program has great faculty, an illustrious history and wonderful scholarship, and this was attractive to me. Transitioning to a new place is a mixture of excitement and disorientation, but it's going well so far.

What is your novel about?

The book has a microcosm of characters, I'm not sure I can summarize everything, but at the centre is our boisterous, wall-eyed narrator, Zamani, who, desperate to unshackle himself from an unsavory past and become a self-made man, rewrites and inserts himself into the history of a family he has become attached to, the Mlambos. He's just obsessed with the past, he's trying to reconstruct a self, he's telling histories he has wrangled out of others, and he's an exposé of others' ugly secrets, though he has secrets of his own he doesn't want found out.

When did you start working on this project, and what was the initial concept?

I started it in 2011, while living in South Africa, and consolidated it at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where it formed my MFA thesis. My initial, frustrated question was, what the hell is going on in Zimbabwe? What's with all the craziness, the food shortages, the hundred trillion dollar bills, the political madness? How and where did it all begin? I was in my early teens when the craziness started and for a long time I was steeped in the experience of it, the immediacy of it and all of that, and it was the distance from home that allowed for reflection. And so, I started reading up on Zim's history, different texts on our history, and the more I read the farther into the past I went, and the more fascinated I became by the various versions of history, about how the past hinges so much on the narratives we assign ourselves or which are assigned to us, what they omit as much as what they include, how they are told. And it occurred to me that the battle in Zim is in large part over its histories, over who gets to name the past, who gets to say what it is, who gets to control and limit that narrative. And there's a lot of dark shit too there, in the past. So, I decided I'd try and write Zimbabwe's modern history and it eventually took the form of a multi-character, multi-history meta-novel.

How are you feeling, in these first few months after your first major book sale?

Incredibly lucky and so very delighted. Still floating.

House of Stone, excerpt:

I'm a man on a mission. A vocation to remake the past and fashion myself into a new being. I wish this were an original undertaking! But like all the other monu-mentous events in my life, it was thrust upon me, this time by my surrogate father, Abednego Mlambo, who sought me out in my lodgings one week ago with a bottle of Bell's in one hand and two crystal glasses pressed to his chest. He was dressed in one of his faded, beige don't-touch-my-ankles trousers that give him the look of a civil servant, complete with a matching, equally faded shirt.

The crystal glasses, balanced one atop the other, were held in place by his chin, and the muggy November heat pouring down his sagging yellow face drip-dripped into them, like our taps on the days when the municipal doesn't cut off the water supply. He raised his free hand, slap-slapped my back and said, his voice bouncing off the crystal walls of the glasses, that he appreciated how I had taken his son Bukhosi under my wing, playing big brother, and that I was like a son to him and he would, from then on, call me his surrogate son.

The moment made us both wince.

It would have been perfect, and may have even made me cry, for no man ever claimed me as his son, had it not been for the fact that Bukhosi, my surrogate brother, who once made the eerie confession that he wished it was I who was his father and not his father, never mind that I'm only twenty-four and he'd just turned seventeen, is missing. He's been missing for a whole week, since the beginning of November. Yes, I must say it again to believe it, for these days it's beginning to feel as though he never existed at all: Bukhosi is missing. *Bukhosi is missing.* BUKHOSI IS MISSING.



