

# The East African

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## Nairobi through the eyes of a drunk

The shortlist for the 2012 Caine Prize for African Writing was released on May 1 by Ben Okri the vice president of the prize. Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist who won the 1991 Booker Prize for his novel, *The Famished Road*.

Kenya's Billy Kahora's short story *Urban Zoning* was among those shortlisted. Kahora is the managing editor of the literary magazine *Kwani?* and also wrote *The True Story of David Muniyakei: Goldenberg Whistleblower*.

*Urban Zoning* is a story about a young man called Kandle in a drunken stupor on his way to work to receive his dismissal letter, and the thoughts that churn in his mind as he drifts through Nairobi's streets.



The zone is a catatonic state of drunkenness that can only be reached after one has drunk alcohol non-stop for three days with little food, water or sleep. Some of Kandle's friends who succeeded in reaching the zone could not handle it: One tried to drive from Nairobi to Thika in 15 minutes and died in an accident, while another sliced his wrists. Yet a third lost her mind and stripped naked in public. But Kandle is the master of the art of 72-hour drinking and is known and respected for it by fellow drinkers. The zone is his element.

The author plays with words like Kandle, which could be kindle, the reading device and "Ocuotho," which means "break wind" in Luo. The word zone also takes on various meanings as the narrative flows.

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In his alcohol-induced delirium, Kandle recalls how he underwent some sort of sexual abuse when he was in high school and how that experience drove him away from rugby into alcohol and into sexual orgies with a house help called Atieno. After Atieno left, Kandle resorted to “looking for peri-urban pussy” in Riruta and somehow got a bank job, which he is about to lose because reaching the zone leaves him no time for reporting to work.

The illicit sex between politicians and underage girls is among the depraved activities taking place around Kandle.

Before the disciplinary committee, Kandle presents a doctor’s letter granting him a sick-off, together with a cooked-up story about his mother going insane and the bungling committee backs off. His job saved, he goes back to the bar to drink more alcohol.

There is a noticeable pattern among the stories coming from emerging writers in Kenya that are published in Kwani? and now appear to be getting international recognition: Most of these stories narrate experiences from characters in some psychotic state induced by either mental illness or drugs.

In Kwani 06 for example, there was *Earthling* by Diriye Osman, which is about a mentally-ill character from an asylum. It also had *Farah Aided Goes to Gulf War*, which is about a dysfunctional sadomachistic relationship between the main characters. And now shortlisted for Caine prize is the view of Nairobi from a staggering “zoned” drunk.

It may appear that crafting the thoughts of deranged characters and their sexual escapades is in vogue among the young Kenyan writers in the Kwani? fraternity. These texts explore Africans at their basest, when their inhibitions are lost either through intoxication or mental illness. They present a deranged mental landscape and the ruined perspectives of people essentially lack erudition. This dramatic but content-free nature relegates these literary works to the level of soft porn in spite of how well written they may be.

Don’t get me wrong. Note that even Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* has sexual undertones. But the sensual messages are like a ruffle of silk or petals on one’s skin. The reader gets a peek, not an eyeful. The sexual message is tender; not this jarring, rough, derogatory and superficial treatment of sex that we find in the mentioned writings.

As a nation that wants to develop creative writing, we must ask ourselves: Do we want to take short-cuts and build shallow, rough and brazen authors who don’t have the patience to produce refined, introspective, though-provoking and well-crafted work?

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