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Fictional omnibus with no driver at the wheel

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A 525-page volume, Kwani? 06 African Fiction Omnibus comprises poetry, short stories and comics.

At the end of the book are biographies of the authors and judges.

I first spotted a volume of Kwani? 06 at a bookstore. On its cover is a semi-crouching King-Kong size figure of a woman striding over a Nairobi skyway.

She has an Afro hairstyle and holds a car in her left hand.

She bares sharp, painted claws in her right hand. From her posture, something seems to have startled her, though her demeanour conveys composure. It is a powerful, riveting image.

I took the young woman to represent a new, daring generation ready to take on the world.

So it was with great expectations that I got a copy of Kwani? 06.

I grabbed a notebook and one of my favourite pens, ready to jot down anything noteworthy as I read — 525 pages would surely sate my reading appetite.

I learnt from the editorial foreword that the stories and poems were selected from a writing competition in 2009 organised by Kwani Trust that targeted authors born after September 1978, the month President Moi took power in Kenya.

The editor confesses that because of that arbitrary cut-off date, some people called them ageists and they challenged such critics to submit a story, which they never did.

I found the fascination with age odd and I couldn't muster how the beginning of a politician's era became a watershed moment in the literary calendar.

I quashed such lingering doubts and read the first two poems. The first one was by George Kinyua.

It played with opposites, using phrases like "less condoms, more trust, less old, more youth."

The second poem by Kijana Ngala was about marginalisation of the struggling youth (expressed through Sheng) by rich old people, using expressions like *Tumekanganyiwa na mamabylon, Hatuna makazi, hatuna maprospects*. Not Ezra Pound quality but not bad.

Then I went onto the first short story, *The Baboon House*, by Waigwa Ndiang'ui.

It is about Ciku, a girl who leaves Nairobi after 12 years and travels back to her parents in Nakuru and her perspective on the present state of her siblings and parents.

They had baboons living nearby and she relates childhood encounters with them, and a retarded neighbour.

The writing is grammatically plain, nothing artistic or witty. The characters are not well-developed. They are simple people with simple problems.

The next story is Seven Yellow Brassieres for Fried Eggs by Tesiro Dore, a Nigerian. This is where things start to get schizophrenic.

I actually don't remember what the story was about. The main character is a university girl.

She has a friend who is expecting too much from her and there are seven university girls who are pressing guns at her face at some point.

It is a montage of staccato action borrowed from gangster movies and university life of lectures, irresponsible sex and excitement.

The story is broken into chunks and doesn't display artistic writing or plot development.

In Farah Aideded Goes to Gulf War, Mehul Gohil narrates a raunchy, sadomachistic relationship with a female chess player called Tabitha, whom the main character, a chuti (a derogatory term for Kenyan of Indian origin) has a fling with.

It is about the tension between the main character and Tabitha, a local girl, and their different perspectives on city life.

The author shows how Nairobians use sheng to describe sex (*kulungula* or *musosi*) and refers to the male organ as Farah Aideded and (Gulf) War as the female one.

I stare blankly at my notebook. I haven't noted anything yet. Next.

Earthling, by Diriye Osman starts with a mentally-ill character called Zeytun being discharged from a mental hospital.

Now this is full-blown schizophrenia. Zeytun is a lesbian in a relationship.

She rushes to a cybercafé to search for her former lover on Facebook.

She uses an iPod to shut out the voices screaming in her head. She has tried to kill herself and thinks her lover wants to kill her. Eh! Next story.

Three Levels of Elevation by Akiyo Michael Kasaija is about Levi Opilo, who narrates his death and his relationship with his closet friend, Johnathan Okao.

It's a retrospective story told from a coffin by a dead man.

Opollo wryly remarks on the people at his funeral — from the gravedigger to his aunties and sisters eulogising him.

He is the first writer that writes good English in the book, so I muster my dwindling expectations and move on to the next story.

Four poems follow. They are mostly a jumble of words meant to convey something deep or immediate.

But the deep or pressing thing is unclear. I think they are rather sad.

All in The Family by Brenda Mukami is about a girl whose mother left university mid-stream and rushed into the arms of an amorous politician.

The girl's mother realises too late that she has been had (by the philandering politician). She responds by becoming a whore.

The story paints Kenyan politicians as corrupt, philandering reprobates. At this point I am almost giving up on Kwani? 06. Next.

Demonstrations of Crazyness by Akenji Ndumu is about a teacher who disciplines students ruthlessly and they have nicknamed him Zero Mort.

After struggling with the crazy, winded, opaque writing, I start losing interest.

For example, a full-page paragraph (page 138), and lousy similes like: "Maracana stadium was the biggest stadium in the world, like a Boeing 747," and a salad of writing comprising French, pidgin and English.

I find myself digging my knuckles deep into my eye sockets trying to uproot boredom and weariness.

And I decide the hell with it. As Paulo Coelho says in *Warrior of Light*, warriors of light never accept what is unacceptable. I close the book at page 140.

Writing is hard work and any writing effort is to be encouraged.

But the editors may have allowed a bizarre preoccupation with age to sabotage quality by not having enough good entries in the competition for this edition of Kwani?

There are uninformed and rather pathetic attempts at mimicking Taban Lo Liyong's *Lexicographicide*, but the authors don't have the command of English and intellectual maturity necessary to yield an artistic product. Instead, they come out as distracted bubbles.

Non-English words like *fitina* are freely used without being italicised or explained.

On page 47, there is a sentence with more than 160 words. What comes out is anti-intellectual, shallow, raw, brazen, and unedifying.

The authors express their emotions — mainly rage, pain, disappointment, betrayal, fear, hopelessness, confusion, frustration, abandonment and marginalisation.

But they don't seem to have fully processed these emotions.

To its credit, Kwani?06 shows how much work African young writers still have to do.

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