

The Award is worth publication with a \$40,000 advance and \$10,000.

Author shocked by Seal award win

interview by Elaine Ostry

"It's like having leprosy," comments Jo Anne Williams Bennett on receiving rejection slips. But after three years of looking for a publisher, Bennett sent her manuscript of *Downfall People* to the Seal First Novel Award Competition — and won. Her reaction? "SHOCK".

The novel was Bennett's first fictional work since her high school days. It took her two years to complete, and she had started it over five times. Bennett likens writing to "turning on a soap opera and seeing what they (the

I like your face. I'd like to be your friend.

characters) are up to." The Award is worth publication with a \$40,000 advance, and \$10,000 in prize money — the largest literary prize for a first novel in the world.

Bennett, an anthropologist, was working on a research project for her doctoral thesis in West Africa for two years, during the seventies, comparing Muslim and Western education. *Downfall People* is Bennett's way of coming to terms with her experiences in Africa.

Bennett comments that people have pre-conceived images of "The Dark Continent": either the image of a Tarzan jungle, or an Ethiopian wasteland. These images, says Bennett, "are not wrong, they're just off-centre . . . and they're certainly not appropriate to West Africa."

She hopes that *Downfall People* will help to correct these stereotypes. The book is fiction, except for the "infuriating and lovable" character of Abu, and the economic, social and political setting of the story. "I'm interested in the way cultures slip past each other," says Bennett, and this interest is obvious in her book.

The novel depicts the life of a West African village through the eyes of a white newcomer, Likki. The story gradually reveals the subtle workings of this society. The village is influenced by three main cultures: its tribal roots, including black magic; the Muslim tradition; and the modern white culture, which includes Catholicism, hospitals, weaponry and Fanta pop.

The West Africans mingle these religions and cultures freely. "To the African," says Bennett, "the idea of exclusivity is a bit ridiculous as far as religion goes." The West Africans do not worry about the contradictions that result from this mix. "Islam has gone very gently and slowly into West Africa," says Bennett, and the people are very relaxed about religion. She relates how the large family she stayed with in the village dealt with religion. The father was a Methodist and an important man in the village. To satisfy the different groups of the town, he gave two daughters to the Catholic church, one daughter to the Reformed Muslim church, and a son to the traditional Muslim culture: "I guess he thinks that if one of his kids is in the right church and makes it to heaven, he'll make sure the rest of the family gets there," says Bennett. Incidentally, Bennett found that the results of Muslim and Western systems of education were not very different.

Bennett elaborates on the economic, medical and political problems of West Africa. The area is very poor and the environment breeds disease. The whites never settled in West Africa, because before the second world war, they could not live there for more than six months. Common diseases include malaria, cerebral malaria, parasitical diseases, river blindness, dysentery — and "contagious hepatitis is as prevalent as the common cold."

"Measles," Bennett said, "kills one out of every ten people born south of the Sahara. When Bennett returned to the village after three years, "every family (I knew), except one, had lost children." Bennett also came



Author Jo Anne Williams Bennett has just won largest literary prize for a first novel... The Seal First Novel Award.

within six inches of a rabid dog; rabid animals are common.

As if the diseases and the poverty weren't enough, the West Africans must also contend with an everpresent army that is free to suppress and torture people as it pleases.

However, the purpose of Bennett's book is not only to illustrate these problems, but to show how the villagers deal with them. "I was trying to convey a sense of joyness, of cheer-

fulness, in everyday life."

"On the physical side," says Bennett, "it's rough; but on the emotional side, it's just a piece of cake." The West Africans, she finds, are "the easiest and kindest and gentlest people to be around." They are also utterly outspoken, as opposed to Western reserve. Bennett at first found this openness difficult to get used to; but, says she, in Africa, "I have, on occasion, walked two miles to some-

body's house to tell him he was annoying me, and why."

The West African does not suppress his positive feelings either. "People will walk up to you in West Africa," says Bennett, "and say: 'I like your face. I'd like to be your friend!'"

Greetings are very important. Bennett says that if you were to walk down the street "self-contained", as soon as someone passes you in the opposite direction, they're going to turn back and say, "Hey! Am I not a human being? Why didn't you greet me?" Thus courtesy, as well as frankness, is part of the West African culture. This friendliness leads to "a very different social interaction" from ours.

One West African custom is 'seni'. This is the friendship and love between two married people who are not married to one another. "You're expected to go and talk to each other for hours and hours and hours, and nobody's supposed to complain." Bennett describes this as the African form of courtly love.

Bennett discovered that the families, and the community itself, were close-knit. An example of the unity is the phenomenal amount of village gossip, "the speed of which is not explainable to any means known to modern science." Nothing is secret in a West African village.

Bennett is now living in Ottawa. She is an Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at Queen's University. She has been involved in another anthropological project for three years; a study of the Cree syllabic language in Northern Ontario. Bennett is now working on another novel, while raising three children. Again, anthropology seems to have supplied Bennett with literary inspiration: her next novel is set in Northern Ontario.

People: tapestry of tales

Downfall People
Jo Anne Williams Bennett
McClelland-Stewart

review by Elaine Ostry

Downfall People, by Jo Anne Williams Bennett, begins powerfully: "Abu was the first to see Fatima's body." This discovery sets the plot of the book into motion. The village decides to give Fatima's baby, called Comfort, to Aleysha, Fatima's cousin, who happens to be a witch. Comfort is taken by her father, Mahmut, and Moomin, Ayesha's husband, plots revenge.

Likki Liddell and John Lavendar arrive in Kpama. Likki is experiencing West African culture for the first time, teaching history in the village school. She immediately discovers the obvious differences between her American culture and the African culture: the lack of consumer goods, the dirt and discomfort of the village. As she makes friends in the village, she is slowly drawn into a complicated drama of revenge and contests of strength.

Likki begins to realize the complexity of the village's society. She tries to understand the mix of Muslim and Christian religions with black magic and superstition that influences the villagers. The element of superstition, she finds, helps them cope with and explain disease and death.

The incidence of disease is thoroughly described in *Downfall People*. An epidemic of measles occurs and Comfort is stricken, but survives. John catches a parasitical disease. Statistics are given on the potential survival of both children and piglets.

Bennett's style is smooth and succinct. Everything is described: no gruesome detail of disease, giving birth, or killing a cow, is

omitted. This style reflects the earthy atmosphere of Kpama itself, and the frankness of the people.

Likki becomes influenced by this atmosphere. The openness of the people begins to affect her own personality the more she associates with them. This is particularly obvious in the scene in which she tells John exactly what she thinks of him. "But here in Africa she had become used to a tougher breed of human beings; people not so easily wounded, people whose sense of self-identity was unassailable, people who said everything in an argument . . . Unfortunately, among her own kind, this was not the case." Likki is beginning to uncover the deeper, subtler differences between her own culture and that of West Africa.

Jo Anne Williams Bennett uses the technique of contrast to highlight the individual qualities of characters, as well as the differences between cultures. Likki is contrasted to Carlotta, who is paranoid of disease and distrustful of the African. Both of these characters do change, and the new selves create contrasts with the way they used to be. Both Likki and Carlotta acquire African lovers, and these and other relationships give them greater understanding of the African's philosophy. Carlotta certainly relaxes and involves herself with John, whom she left for Ibu Sinna, and these two relationships are compared to show the different views of love and sex between the two cultures.

Ibu Sinna is a mysterious character. He is reputed revolutionary and a trader in the black market. He is engaged in a silent battle with Captain Aroah, forming another contrast. Aroah lacks the nobility of Ibu Sinna. As a captain of the army which is a constant

force in the village, he delights in threatening Likki and the villagers. When Aroah is killed, no one admits to the crime. The villagers claim that Aroah committed "suicide" because he incurred the hate of everyone.

Abu is the 'fifth business' character of *Downfall People*; he is behind every plot, he knows every piece of gossip. He manipulates people. Abu is a boy with dreams of becoming a cattle breeder and the husband of Comfort.

John contrasts Abu's ambitions to the harsh reality of his environment, claiming that Abu can never achieve his goals. Likki receives several views of Kpama's social, economic, medical and political problems from John, Carlotta, Ibu Sinna, even from Captain Aroah. The interpretations of these problems demonstrate their complexities.

As Likki learns more about the people and problems of Kpama, she becomes more perceptive of herself, of others, and of society. She loses much of her original naivety. She becomes more frank in her speech and decisive in her actions. She witnesses birth and death first-hand, for the first time. Her experiences help her grow as a person.

Bennett succeeds in developing the characters gradually. The changes in the people are convincing. The plot is a little convoluted; it certainly demands that the reader pay attention. However, it is logical and moves well; it does not hesitate in its progression but increases in suspense. The final events of the story are truly mysterious, but Bennett makes even the most bizarre events real to the reader. Her portrayal of a culture is convincing, profound, and interesting. If her first novel is this impressive, her next novels should be even more rewarding.