

NEELK BOOK OF THE MONTH

***Measuring Time* by Helon Habila
Review by Karsten Levihn - April 2008**

A child soldier and a historian, one an impulsive adventurer, one a hesitant intellectual - the twins Mamo and LaMamo at the centre of Helon Habila's second novel could not be more different. The parallels and differences of his characters are Habila's brush strokes in an ambitious portrait of post-independence Africa.

Habila's first novel *Waiting for an Angel* was very much what people like to label 'a political novel': a concise book, with an episodic story settled in Lagos during the Abacha era, concerned with themes like the role of writers in a dictatorship, poverty, and most of all freedom of speech. Though equally readable, *Measuring Time* could, at first glance, not be more different. Written in a more candid style, the tale of the sickly Mamo growing up in rural Nigeria to be an amateur historian seems straightforward, focussed on the private lives of its characters and removed from the world of big politics.

Born with sickle-cell anaemia, Mamo grows to be the opposite of his daredevil twin brother LaMamo. Their initially dyadic relationship is interrupted when, at the age of sixteen, LaMamo runs away to become a child-soldier. While he wanders West Africa, his brother Mamo hardly ever leaves the village. After reading a book of colonial historiography about his home town, Mamo is determined to write an alternative, benevolent account of his village's past. With his first article published he becomes a local celebrity and is recruited to write the biography of the provincial ruler, the Mai. While gradually unearthing the Mai's family's unflattering involvement with British colonial rule, Mamo comes to realize that he is being used as a pawn in a political intrigue.

This, however, is only one of the many plot lines that run through *Measuring Time*, ranging from the sad story of Mamo's love-interest – who suffers from the separation from her son after the divorce from a violent husband – to the failing of Mamo's father's aspirations in the political arena. The setting of *Measuring Time*, the small town of Ketu, thus becomes the node of a network of stories that spread out all over Africa. Most importantly, there is LaMamo, Mamo's absent counterpart, whose fate is recounted in a handful of letters to Mamo, relating the grisly details of his life as a mercenary in various civil wars from Chad to Liberia. Habila keeps these passages few and far between, refusing to cater to Western stereotypes of Africa as a place of perpetual violence and humanitarian disaster. But although these letters seem to be coming from a different fictional universe, and although they fill only a couple of pages, LaMamo's tale lies like a shadow over the book. The initially unsuspecting world of Ketu is overshadowed by the grim presence of another Africa, whose existence seeps into the everyday reality of small town Nigeria, until both worlds collapse in the novel's frantic climax.

The twins Mamo and LaMamo thus become icons for two experiences of post-independence Africa, their parallel lives the code for the side-by-side existence of middle class normality and humanitarian disaster. Beneath the deceptively simple surface, *Measuring Time* is a complex exploration of the Janus-face of African modernity.

Habila, Helon. *Measuring Time*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007. (383 pp.).