

## **Kunle Ajibade and Jailed For Life; A Reporter's Prison Notes**

**By Anne Sebba**

What stays in the mind five years on from Kunle Ajibade's brief visit to London is his total lack of bitterness and anger. After three years in a Nigerian prison facing life imprisonment he was able to shrug his shoulders about the grotesque miscarriage of justice he suffered and the referred pain endured by his wife Bunmi and two then small children. His philosophical approach to what had happened to him - and others - grew not from a belief that he thought the system in his country should be tolerated or could not be changed but more because he knew he had to move on. We at English PEN were lucky that one of the first places this engaging and voraciously well read journalist chose to move on to as soon as he was released in an amnesty was London. His stay here was memorable, not just for me and my family, but for everyone who came to listen to him talk at Hampstead Theatre one night in November 1999 as part of a PEN fundraising gala. Almost all the letters received afterwards - many from those who had not known about PEN writers in prison work beforehand but would never forget it in future - talked about Kunle's breathtaking speech, not the performances of the famous, grateful though we were for these.

After London, Kunle went to Los Angeles. He had won the Feuchtwanger Fellowship, set up by Lion Feuchtwanger, a German writer, in memory of the artists who fled Germany during WW2. PEN Center USA West, having learnt that he had begun clandestinely sketching out a book while in prison, had recommended him the book, which he finished there, has just been published by Heinemann Nigeria and is available in UK from African Books Collective Ltd., The Jam Factory, 27 Park End Street, Oxford, OX1 1HU.

In the book, Kunle tells how he managed to relieve the endless daily tedium of his prison days only by reading - I knew something of this because in one of the very special letters he managed somehow to smuggle out, he had asked if I could possibly get him a copy of Martha Gellhorn's *View from the Ground*. I had enlisted Victoria Glendinning's help to get him a signed version. Months later we learnt that his jailers had stolen the first copy so we organised a second. This time it arrived at its

destination and was devoured. "Reading was the only means I used to lubricate and preserve my mind from shrinking to fit the smallness of Makurdi prison," Ajibade writes in his account of that time. "Books gave me the necessary energy with which I pushed against the silence and gloom imposed me." He lists 53 different authors of various nationalities whose works he read while in prison. He explains that on days when he was engrossed in the lonely activity of communing with his fellow authors he did not bother to leave his cell. His warders, suspicious, reported him for this, claiming his intentions were malevolent. He told me later that he had to bribe his jailers for pencil, paper and turning a blind eye. He often wrote at night- letters and an outline for the diary- when no one was looking, officially, and slept as much as he could during the day.

"To keep myself physically fit, I walked up and down my cell 500 times every morning and the same times every evening except on Saturdays and Sundays when I did 300 press ups and 500 pull aparts."

**Jailed for Life** is a chilling record of General Sani Abacha's appalling regime. But it is also testament to a brave man's ability to transcend the agony of loneliness, helped not only by books but by letters from PEN members around the world reassuring him he was not forgotten. Kunle Ajibade is now back in Lagos.

*Anne Sebba is a member of the Writers in Prison Committee of English PEN*