

# safe haven

Miami has become a refuge for a respected novelist fleeing persecution in Zimbabwe



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**ENEMY OF THE STATE:** Chenjerai Hove, who has been ranked as high as No. 17 on the Zimbabwe government's Enemies of the State list, is the author of the highly acclaimed novel, *Bones*.

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The death threats? Too numerous to count. The serious attempts on his life ranged from make-believe doctors offering potentially fatal "medicine" to a traffic accident that was no accident at all.

In his native Zimbabwe, he's been ranked as high as No. 17 on the government's Enemies of the State list.

Miami, meet novelist/poet/essayist Chenjerai Hove, Chen to his friends, the author of the highly

acclaimed novel, *Bones*.

"I don't really think I'm an enemy of the state," Hove says, still puzzled that the Zimbabwe government once sent four armed policemen to apprehend him on trumped-up charges. "They just fear a writer. I don't even kill a chicken."

He's here, for the next two years at least, as a guest of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, with his stay coordinated by Miami Dade College. During his time in South Florida, Hove will give guest lectures to Miami Dade students, and

also interact with the general public by attending a variety of community events.

Though Miami has long been a place of refuge for those fleeing political and/or economic instability abroad, this marks the first time the city has taken part in the International Cities of Refuge Network — an organization that provides safe haven to writers who are persecuted in their home countries. The network is a refashioned version of

\*TURN TO SAFE HAVEN, 6E



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## Out of Africa, novelist finds a refuge in Miami

\*SAFE HAVEN, FROM 1E

the International Parliament of Writers that was founded by prominent writers such as Salman Rushdie and Russell Banks.

"He's just starting to get his bearings and feel comfortable in his new home," said Alina Interian, executive director of Miami Dade College's Florida Center for the Literary Arts. "He's quite charming... he has hundreds of stories to tell."

With his warm, unhurried handshakes — followed quickly by frequent, and boisterous, fits of laughter — Hove hardly seems like a man dragged down by the pain of exile. He's more like a wisecracking, and wise, family uncle.

Nevertheless, an exile Hove most certainly is, thanks to an oppressive Zimbabwe government that sees treason in Hove's boldly critical novels and poems. He's been bouncing around Europe and North America since 2001.

Hove is best known for his 1989 novel, *Bones*, which tells the story of a poor farm mother who loses her son in the Zimbabwean war of liberation. It would not be the last time that Hove chronicled the real, and often tragic, costs of Zimbabwe's attempts at self-governance. *Bones* received Africa's highest honor for literature: the Noma Award.

While in exile, Hove has continued to castigate the Zimbabwe government for its human-rights abuses — he is working on a memoir examining how violence came to be such a systemic part of Zimbabwe's political system.

### CARROT, THEN STICK

Before Hove fled his homeland nine years ago, he says President Robert Mugabe's regime tried various methods to silence him. There was the relative, a government

employee, who showed up one day with a bag filled with cash — U.S. dollars — and the promise that Hove would also be given prime farmland for in exchange for cooperating. Hove had no interest in either counting the money — he estimates it was more than \$200,000 — or taking up farming. But he says he at least came away from the experience with an ego boost.

"I didn't know I was so expensive," he said with a hearty laugh.

With the carrot approach unsuccessful, Zimbabwe's powers-that-be turned to the stick — and swung repeatedly. Hove can remember at least five serious attempts on his life — along with never-ending death threats that once brought his mother to tears.

After returning from a whirlwind book tour in 1994, Hove checked into a Harare hospital for exhaustion. In the middle of the night, a peculiar visitor showed up, dressed in a white doctor's coat.

"He woke me up, around 2 a.m., and said 'Oh, I've come to give you sleeping tablets,'" Hove recalled. "How can someone come and wake me up and try to give me sleeping tablets?... I said 'How come you don't have a name tag?' and he said, 'Oh I'm sorry,' and then he disappeared."

At the advice of his primary physician, Hove quickly checked out the next morning.

Another near-death experience occurred a few years earlier. Hove and several other authors were driving back from a local writer's conference when their car was aggressively T-boned by another vehicle. Hove and his colleagues emerged largely unharmed, as their car fortuitously rammed up against a lightpole, which kept the vehicle from flipping over.

The driver who caused

the crash happened to leave behind a license plate. Hove grabbed it. After about three months of police inaction on the case, a burglar broke into Hove's home.

That incriminating license plate was the only item the thief took.

### INTO EXILE

Hove eventually realized that leaving Zimbabwe was unavoidable. The prospect of future frivolous arrests loomed so large that he'd taken to sleeping days and working nights. The government, he said, liked to yank dissidents from their home late at night — just so the neighborhood could see them arrested and humiliated in their pajamas.

"I said 'No, if they come for me, I'm going to be well-dressed,'" Hove said.

Exile, though, has meant enormous sacrifice for Hove. The author left behind his wife and youngest daughter, and earlier this month, on Hove's 54th birthday, his mother died in Zimbabwe.

"She promised not to die before I came back, and I promised not to die while in exile," Hove said. "The cancer didn't keep the promise, and she's gone now."

Unable to return for the funeral, Hove observed the traditional week-long mourning period in Miami — abstaining from meat, and declining an invitation to dance from a festive stranger he met at Bayside Marketplace.

Yet Hove, like his writings, is not bitter. He looks forward to exploring the "real Miami," away from the tourist traps — a place where ordinary people confront ordinary problems. He's heard there's a giant African baobab tree at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, and he'd very much like to see it.

Said Hove: "We have to pick up some flowers from the sadness of exile."