

DIE SWERFJARE VAN POPPIE NONGENA

by Elsa Joubert; Tafelberg, 1978

Reviewed by Marie Dyer.

Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena (the wandering years of Poppie Nongena) was published a year ago and has since been reprinted twice. It won almost immediate distinction and acclaim: it gained three literary awards (the Luyt, Hofmeyr and C.N.A. prizes); it was serialised in Afrikaans magazines and newspapers (and extracts have appeared in English periodicals); it has been a major literary, social, even political talking-point in the Afrikaans world.

Its literary merits deserve this distinction; but literary merits are not always so immediately and widely appreciated, nor so justly rewarded. Its recognition gives some grounds for hope that the apparent shift in Afrikaner thinking is real; that there really is a new climate — intellectual, at least; that this novel is a literary work, one could say, whose time has come.

It is in the form of a long, detailed, circumstantial, autobiographical record of the life of an Afrikaans-speaking Xhosa woman, born in the North-Western Cape. (She does in fact exist, as the author explains in her preface; and the novel is based very substantially on fact). This woman, Poppie Nongena of the title, does not address the reader directly; her story is recounted by an apparently intimate, sympathetic, totally self-effacing confidant, who moves easily between indirect speech and Poppie's first person narration. This form seems to convey Poppie's experiences and attitudes — in fact the whole pressure of her life and personality — with perfect immediacy. The diction, even of the indirect speech, is as if Poppie's own (the kind of 'Cape' Afrikaans that uses, for example 'slaat' for 'slaan', 'laat' or 'lat' for 'sodat' or 'totdat', and admits English words or phrases with no inhibition or sense of strangeness); the style is simple and episodic (apparently artless, but obviously constructed with great exactness and emotional coherence); there is an accumulation of significant and relevant detail; so that the solidity of Poppie's life and environment becomes irresistible.

The events of her life are these: she is born in Upington location in 1936, and lives there as a young child; then moves with most of her mother's family (her father has long since disappeared) to Lambert's Bay. She works in the fish-canneries from the age of 13; at 16 she marries a fellow-worker, also a Xhosa, from the Transkei. They set up house and start a family; but as Nationalist theories begin to be enforced in the 1950's, she and all other African women are forced — by arrests, fines, demolished houses — to leave the area. They proceed, as recommended by the authorities, to Nyanga township in Cape Town. Accommodation is a perpetual struggle; Poppie finds 'live-in' jobs, seeing her baby briefly at week-ends. Her husband, lonely on his own in Lambert's Bay, follows her to Cape Town and has to accept contract work. But the law follows her too, she becomes "illegal" as a resident in Cape Town, and for fifteen years, as she bears and brings up four more children and becomes part of the Cape Town community, she conducts a desperate struggle with the authorities for permission to stay; moving

from house to house, applying for permits, monthly extensions of permits, fortnightly extensions of extensions, appealing through lawyers, through social workers, through the hospital when her husband is sick. Finally in 1971 she is forced to give in; she travels alone with the five children (the eldest 16, the youngest a baby) to Mdantsane near East London, where she is provided with a house. She stays there at the end of a line of money and support from her husband and family in Cape Town; but her husband is an anxious, possessive, dependent man; his health is worn down by worry and loneliness and he dies after four years. Poppie returns with her youngest child and her son's illegitimate baby to Cape Town to find work, leaving her sons at school in Mdantsane and her elder daughters with her husband's parents in the Transkei. She suffers immense hardships in the 1976 riots, although sustained by the confidence that her own elder children are remote and safe — but her young step-brother Jakkie has shot a policeman in the disturbances; and the novel ends with her hearing that he has involved her son and her eldest daughter in his escape through the Transkei to Lesotho; and both have been arrested and detained by the police, 'lat hulle kan praat'.

These major events — and all the other minor ones in the recital — are fully felt and participated in by the reader, largely because of the fullness of authentic detail. One responds directly to the feel, say, of Poppie's long, long walks with her grandmother back to Upington bearing bundles of firewood, which are first held tight and steady but then released as they begin to lie on her head and move with her down the road; or the feel of the strangeness of the white employers' bedroom as Poppie brings in the morning coffee and for a few minutes doesn't know whether they are awake; or the feel of her kitchen in the house in Nyanga where a young white girl comes to conduct a Sunday School class, and the children roll their arms about singing "Asa Lod loves me, asa heppie asa bie"; or the feel of the perpetually crowded, uncomfortable, tense-atmosphered influx control office, where the clerk's fingers are always idly playing with the terrifying 'endorsed-out' stamp; or the feel of the newly-built house in Mdantsane, isolated and surrounded with builders' rubble, where Poppie and the children camp on the floor the night of her arrival, with only the luggage they brought with them on the train, and Poppie tries to suppress the mounting feeling of panic at how far they are from anyone who knows of their existence, while her son in the next room strikes matches periodically throughout the night. The novel is in fact a succession, a profusion, of telling, moving, illuminating, and — at least in the first half — amusing and entertaining incidents, gaining in vividness and impressiveness by the low-keyed, conversational direct manner of their expression. In another example, Poppie, sick and pregnant, approaches the influx control office for what she is certain will be her final decree of eviction, and overcome with tension and nausea collapses against a lamp

post; while a passing white woman, tentatively sympathetic but obviously wondering whether Poppie is drunk, hands her a tissue to wipe her lips.

(At the end of the novel the scale of the disasters and sufferings to be described perhaps puts more strain on the form than it can sustain. The simple style and unheightened language is not entirely adequate to convey Poppie's experiences of Boxing Day 1976, fleeing with her little daughter and baby grandson from a burning house, frantically evading the stones and pangas of the hostel dwellers and the bullets of the police, and finally finding, when they have reached refuge, that the child on her back has been killed by a stone. These unimaginable horrors remain, as it were, unimagined — the reader is horrified and appalled but cannot be fully included in the experience.)

The obvious political significance of the novel rests on its simple and moving authenticity. Poppie is a real presence, a person; continually persevering to keep both her personality and her family intact through years of disintegrating pressures. The reader's imaginative identification with a woman at the receiving end of Apartheid; the full personal understanding of the meaning and reality of a brutal and uncaring set of laws, an understanding enforced without stridency, without polemic, with little recrimination, must be a political revelation to the uneasy theorists who probably make up a significant proportion of educated Nationalist supporters. Although the comparison with **Uncle Tom's Cabin** does not do justice to the literary qualities of **Die Swerfjare**, it is obvious why it has been drawn.

Further political insights are conveyed by the fact that Poppie's own attitudes are 'non-political'. From her first confrontation with the law — the eviction of Africans from factory accommodation in Lambert's Bay — to the arrest of her children, Poppie's reactions are the almost unprotesting ones of people who have become used to the knowledge that the circumstances of their lives are determined by others. As the law squeezes and harasses her beyond bearing, her struggles to maintain a significant life under it demand all her energies: none are to spare for questions, analyses or protests. She becomes virtually incapable of assigning responsibility for her distresses. She derives, for instance, an obscure but continuing comfort from the words of a religious white clerk in the influx control office: 'As die

Here wil dat jy bly, dan sal jy bly, en as die Here wil dat jy gaan, dan sal jy gaan'. She refuses to try to make sense of the arbitrary granting or withholding of permits: 'Ons lewe is so deurmekaar. Ons is dit gewoond. Die een kry pas en die ander kry nie. En as jy kry, is jy maar bly daaroor'. (Poppie's brother Mosie is only a little more articulate in this matter. When Poppie returns to Cape Town, her employer, who works for the Government, arranges for her in one visit the permit she herself struggled unavailingly to get for fifteen years, and Mosie says: 'Dis wat jy lankal moes gedoen het, Sisi . . . Net by governmentmense gaan werk cause why hulle hou van hulle comfort') Poppie's resentment at her move is directed obliquely against her family, her mother and brothers, who have permits and can stand by and watch her leave. And even in the riots, the fact that the police fire only at the township residents and do nothing to stop the more aggressive hostel dwellers makes Poppie no more than 'hartseer'. But her stepbrother Jakkie, the representative of the younger generation, provides, in brief comments, the judgements and reactions that his elders evade: 'Hoe kan ek vir jou kwaad wees, ek is kwaad vir die wet'; 'Die Here Jesus, so force hulle haar'. When Jakkie's contemporaries 'take over' in the townships, he, in common with them, detaches himself from the adults; says nothing of what he is doing; evades or jokes when asked direct questions. The adults are confused some, like Mosie, not ungratified:

My sustertjie, sê Mosie vir Poppie, ek like nie hierdie riots nie, ek like dit nie dat die kinders die owerheid tease en seerkry nie, of lat hulle my kar stop en skree donate! donate! totlat ek vir hulle petrol vir hulle petrol bombs uittap nie. Maar my sustertjie, ek kan nie dit help nie, daar's iets in my hart wat sê: At last.

Others like Poppie herself, are totally dismayed at the division between the generations, and can never be reconciled. Jakkie tries to reassure her: 'Ons doen nie slegte dinge nie'; 'Ons doen dit vir julle'. But Poppie is never convinced or even reached: her most passionate and heartfelt cry, when she and her family have suffered catastrophe after catastrophe, is 'Die Here weet ek het nie die moeilikheid gesoek nie!'

In short, as a novel depicting and interpreting some of the complex and significant experiences of "being South African", **Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena** is difficult to surpass. □

STATEMENT ON CENSORSHIP

Southern African PEN Centre (Johannesburg)

The censors have done it yet again! However, we are not daunted. We will keep on writing the truth as fearlessly as ever.

We are quite aware that the censors will never stop hammering us, but neither will we give up writing about the Truth as we see it. Writing is part of the struggle for human rights, and like any struggle there are bound to be casualties.

But the motto is always: never give up.

The banning of *Call Me Not A Man* by Mtutuzeli Matshoba, coming only a week after that of Omar Badsha's *Letter to Farzanah*, is deplorable, to say the least. The Johannesburg Centre of PEN International again states it is vehemently opposed to arbitrary censorship which has become dictatorial and terroristic towards creative writers.

No amount of pressure, overt or covert, will force us to conform to censorship.

Mothobi Mutloatse
Chairman