

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