

BOOKS & TV

A SMORGASBORD OF SHORT STORIES SET IN SA

Sunshine and Shadows
Abel Phelps
Echoing Green Press

SUNSHINE and Shadows, a collection of nineteen short stories by Pietermaritzburg resident, Abel Phelps, was first published in a private venture in 1991. This year sees the republication of the same material, by Echoing Green Press.

The work is divided into two sections. Those stories in the first section are inspired by early 20th century farming life in the north-eastern Cape Karoo and the southern Orange Free State. Those in the second section are set in a range of urban localities, circa the fifties and sixties.

While the work is not adventurous or experimental in terms of style or structure, while the endings to some of the tales are a little laboured and while the work has a slightly dated quality, there is no doubt that Phelps has the gift of telling a story.

Short and simple, the stories focus on the triumphs and troughs of the human heart, the human spirit and Phelps has a strong, and often mischievous, sense of the

ironies of life.

Phelps frequently writes in the first person, skilfully adopting the narrative voice of a range of protagonists — the suspicious wife in *The Cable Bridge*, a young boy in *Up on the Koppie*, the Boer who befriends a Brit in *A Gift of Milk*, the little black boy who finds joy and a symbol of freedom in *The Kite*, the coloured man, in *Headwork*, who is made redundant and, in

pursuit of a new job, acquires a straight-haired wig, in order to pass for white.

The two stories entitled *The Cable Bridge* illustrate the prerogative and power of the writer to manipulate his material. The basics of the story are the same in each version, but the narrative perspective is altered, additional information is injected into the second version and the endings differ. Those who teach creative writing might find these companion pieces useful classroom material.

While many of the stories appear light-hearted and humorous, tenderness, tension and tragedy often lurk just below the surface. In combining such sunshine and shadows, Phelps demonstrates his astute understanding of the human condition.

Moira Lovell

