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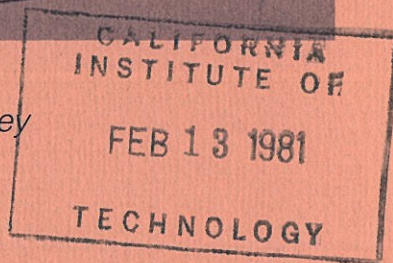
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Elsa Joubert's *The Long Journey
of Poppie Nongena*

Significance
Synopsis
Reviews



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POPPIE AND HER BOSWELL

The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena, tracing the suffering of a black woman and her family in South Africa through a long hegira, is of seminal political importance in Afrikaans political thinking. This introductory essay on the author and the significance of her novel is followed by a synopsis of the novel and a selection of book reviews in English.

The novel, based upon the life of a real person, has sold more than 20,000 copies in Afrikaans, making it the all time best-selling Afrikaans novel not prescribed in schools. A novel equally successful in the United States would have to sell more than one million copies. Poppie has won three Afrikaans literary prizes. That itself is significant when it is realized that major Afrikaans novels have been banned in recent years.

Novels are often adjuncts to revolutionary change. Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, though a rather simplistic tract, had an enormous impact upon racial thinking and on abolition politics in the American north from its publication in 1852 up until the Civil War. Tomorrow's history books may well credit Poppie with equal influence in arousing Afrikaner consciences in a different century and milieu. I say "tomorrow" because the fact revolutionary changes is that the now taking place peacefully in South Africa are still debated by some and dismissed as cosmetic, although not by this writer.

Douglas Watts, the drama critic of the New York Daily News, characterized the newest play by South African author Athol Fugard, A Lesson from an Aloe, as a "strange and grim play probing deep into the resilient

spirit of man." The aloe is a bitter fruit and Watts's description applies as well to Poppie, whose author was long ago stimulated by Fugard's humanity. Elsa Joubert's novel has, in its turn, stimulated Afrikaner thinking and produced a political storm over its revelations.

I met Elsa Joubert around 1955 through her husband Klaas, then a columnist for the Johannesburg Afrikaans newspaper Die Transvaler. Klaas invited me for dinner and he and Elsa have been two people I have greatly admired over the subsequent years.

Elsa's maturation as a ware Afrikaner (true Afrikaner) trying to understand blacks, their problems and their goals, has paralleled the journey of many of her fellow Afrikaners in coming to a sensitive understanding of their fellow citizens.

Elsa Joubert grew up in Paarl. This pleasant town in the Western Cape is in the center of the magnificent wine producing countryside. When Dag Hammarskjold drove through Paarl, the then Secretary General of the United Nations remarked as he observed the gnarled vineyards heavy with grapes, the oak trees aflame with their autumnal red, and the soaring peaks of the Hottentot Hollands Mountains that they were not what he thought of as Africa but more resembled parts of Europe.

Growing up in this particular coign of vantage on South Africa, Elsa Joubert had a great deal of association with the Coloured people. But as a child she almost never saw a black person. There weren't many Africans in the Western Cape.

The original Bushmen and Hottentots had all but disappeared or had become one ethnic strain within the Coloured or mixed community. The closest Bantu-speaking peoples lived hundreds of miles to the east when Elsa Joubert's forebears settled in the valleys of what Sir Francis Drake hailed as the "fairest Cape in all the world."

Long after provisions of the Job Reservation Act had been scrapped where they applied to black and white, job reservation was still applied to "protect" Coloured workers in the Cape from competition from blacks.

It was not until 1980 that the Urban Foundation obtained permission from a Nationalist government to provide new housing for blacks in the Western Cape. Since it had come to power in 1948, the National Party

had adamantly opposed permanent black residence in the Western Cape and still thinks of the blacks' sojourn as temporary.

Thus it is understandable that someone like Elsa Joubert, growing up in Paarl, would not have had first-hand knowledge of black people or their lives. As she puts it herself: "I just didn't come into contact with blacks at all until I lived in the Transvaal."

Even there, her initial contact was largely restricted to blacks who performed menial jobs in houses or in shops. Johannesburg and its suburbs were "white by night," at least in theory. Blacks lived mostly in the southern-western townships that have come to be known by the acronym Soweto.

Paradoxically, at the time I first met Elsa Joubert she had seen more of black people in adjacent countries where she researched her travel books than in South Africa. Her writing was then colorful but it lacked the depth of character analysis one finds in Poppie.

ORIGINS OF POPPIE

Recently, over lunch in her Cape Town home, Elsa Joubert surprised me by declaring that her first insights into how blacks lived in Johannesburg came from an article of mine. It traced the Motlana family of Soweto through a typical day. The father to work; the mother to work; and the two children to Soweto schools. Hardships faced by blacks came across strongly. I had spent days following the Motlanas where it was not too dangerous for a white person -- riding the Soweto trains for example.

As Elsa put it: "The other day I was trying to think how I first got interested in the kind of story Poppie represents. Maybe it was that Motlana story you wrote. That's twenty-five years ago! But I remember that it started me thinking about how little I knew of African lives.

"Then a few years later I went to see Athol Fugard's play The Blood Knot. That stirred my conscience and made me think even more."

The play had first been performed in 1961 in the Rehearsal Room, a sort of nondescript theater in an old factory building in Johannesburg. There are only two

characters, one black and one brown. In one scene, Zachariah, who is darker skinned, recalls a woman's song:

My skin is black,
The soap is blue,
But the washing comes out white.

I took a man
On a Friday night;
Now I'm washing a baby too.

Just a little bit black,
And a little bit white,
He's a Capie through and through.

It is easy to see how The Blood Knot -- the title refers to the tie the two characters establish -- would particularly appeal to Elsa Joubert.

She went on: "All of this must have lain in the back of my mind while I kept on writing travel books. Then when I heard Poppie's story first hand, it all came together."

In the meantime, Elsa Joubert had gone beyond her travel accounts of Egypt, the Sudan, Uganda, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Angola. Just before the Portuguese fall in Angola, she wrote an account of their situation in her book Die Nuwe Afrikaans.

Gathering the material for Poppie required a number of long interviews and careful questioning to pin down with scrupulous accuracy the many details of a forty-year hegira. The tapes themselves were by no means a novel. They were more like iron ore in relation to the fabricated steel of the final novel.

Afrikaans-speaking critics have commented on how exquisitely Elsa Joubert has used that language to convey the texture of events. She did the English translation herself, but her love is still for the Afrikaans version.

AFRIKANER RACIAL ATTITUDES BEFORE POPPIE

The story of Poppie's long journey was published at a special time in Afrikaans history. Its success owes something to the times. The period from 1948 to 1978 was largely devoted to redressing Afrikaner wrongs against English-speaking South Africans and in building

barriers against what was perceived as potential African domination.

Thus there was the struggle for a republic free of the British imperial domination. The further struggle for the entrenchment of Afrikaans language rights required a lot of the Afrikaners' attention. It seems strange today, but in 1950 in the Transvaal it was my experience that if I asked an Afrikaans-speaking farmer about race relations, he was likely to reply:

"They are getting better -- we get on better with the rooineks than we used to do." He was referring to the traditional Boer idea that all English-speaking whites were effete city dwellers who got "red necks" as soon as they were exposed to the sun in the fields.

The time of repressive legislation rolled on for twenty years. Prime Minister Verwoerd predicted that Africans would begin to flow out of the urban areas by 1978. But of course, when 1978 came Dr. Verwoerd was dead and the movement of both Africans and Afrikaners to the cities was more pronounced than ever.

Perhaps it was only in this changed context that a novel such as Poppie, detailing the suffering of Africans under the myriad of harsh regulations, could have such an appeal to many Afrikaners. Earlier, the suffering, however deplorable, might have been justified by some as being only temporary. But by 1978 the conditions of black urban existence had become permanent. And not only permanent but recognized as such by National Party leaders such as Minister Piet Koornhof.

The awakening in the universities and the press of Afrikaner thinking with respect to Africans has not come evenly among various institutions. It began in the universities in the 1950s, and they have continued in various ways to spotlight evil and to promote good. But academics do not have much influence on politicians in South Africa. For good or ill South Africa does not differ much from the rest of the world in that respect.

Next to be heard from within Afrikanerdom was the press. For the first decade of National Party rule the press continued to be the journalistic arm of Afrikaner nationalism. It was generally accepted that the main Afrikaans publishing companies would have three or four politicians on their boards, although Dr. Malan had been personally opposed to this practice.

The Afrikaans press began to show strong signs

of independence throughout the 1970s. With the coming to power of P. W. Botha as Prime Minister, all politicians resigned as directors of publishing companies, freeing the press from an awkward and unwelcome form of political pressure. Today the Nasionale Pers, for example, has on its staff a specialist on African politics who devotes all his efforts in that regard on behalf of the group. This is a far cry from a generation ago when both English and Afrikaans newspapers made it a practice to assign a reporter to "native politics and crime."

Afrikaners long held business in disdain at the same time they were trying to penetrate English dominance in that sphere. One method was to use state funds, after the National Party came to power in 1948, to establish and expand state owned enterprises in such fields as steel, transportation, and energy. Some of these enterprises, such as the gasoline-from-coal SASOL project, have been spectacularly successful.

BUSINESS AND CHURCHES

Afrikaner firms have not been outstanding in their recognition of the needs of black people. Some are progressive in the best sense of the word. Others pay black workers as little as possible and provide appalling conditions. In this respect they seem not to differ significantly from firms headed by English-speaking South Africans, or from those established by foreign companies.

Individual Afrikaners have stood out, notably Anton Ruppert, who warns white South Africans to pay attention to black needs because, in his vivid words, "if they don't eat, we won't sleep."

The struggle of the Afrikaner people from the 1930s, when one out of every four lived in poverty and was known as a "poor white," through the organization of groups such as the Reddingsdaadbond, to the prosperity of the present day is a tremendous story. But recognition of black economic aspirations on the part of the political leaders has just begun.

Considering the pivotal role of the churches in Afrikaans society, an outside observer must be disappointed in their lack of leadership with respect to the status of black people. There have been crusades for fair treatment -- for example, that led in the 1950s by Dominee Landman of the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk

-- but on balance the three Dutch Reform churches have not exercised strong leadership. The largest N. G. Church is today under heavy criticism from its so-called sister churches representing the Coloured, Indian, and Black communities. It is they who may expel the "mother church" from communion with fellow worshipers. Some progress has been made in allowing attendance freely without regard to race. At one time a cartoonist could ridicule the N. G. Church with a drawing of a black man scrubbing the floor of a church and a caption in the mouth of a policeman, "Its all right to be on your knees as long as you don't pray."

The Hervermde Church, more intimately associated with the old Transvaal Republic and espousing a doctrine of no equality ("not in church nor in state"), has lagged farthest behind in understanding black sensitivities. The smallest of the Afrikaans churches has often been in the vanguard. I refer to the Gereformeerde Kerk, whose parishioners are often called "doppers." This theologically conservative church has been noticeably outspoken on the side of racial justice when church doctrine has been involved. Although the church leaders frown on such activities as dancing at their Potchefstroom University, they have reacted positively to black students at "Potch."

LITERATURE

If racial attitudes changed slowly in universities, in the press, in business, and now in some Afrikaans churches, there has been a growth of sensitivity in Afrikaans literature. In poetry as began in the 1950s. Opperman's poem Kersliedjie is a good example because, unlike most poetry, it was reprinted in a daily newspaper. The poem is the Christmas story. The three wise men follow a star across the high Karoo to a slum area of Cape Town and there find the Christ child -- and he is brown. In the same period the top poetry prize in Afrikaans was awarded to a Coloured poet.

A group of Afrikaans novelists in the 1960s, known for their decade as "Die Sestigers," took a broader view of racial and sexual matters than was the norm in Afrikaans circles and ran into sharp censorship as a result. Even today, some Afrikaans novelists find their work banned in South Africa. Others have taken to circulating several thousand xerox copies of new novels before official publication in a successful effort to beat the ban, much as manuscripts have been circulated

in the Soviet Union as "samzidat."

Thus the Afrikaans publication of Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena, by the Afrikaans publishing house Tafelberg, came at a particular juncture in the history of Afrikaners. The dream of the homelands and of apartheid as solutions to the problem of race relations has been abandoned. As we have seen, the permanence of blacks in urban areas is now accepted. The interaction of the lives of blacks and Afrikaners is recognized as a fact. The need for new constitutional arrangements is also recognized, whether they are proposed by the white-dominated committee of the President's Council, or by the black-dominated Buthelezi Commission.

Elsa Joubert's story has deep African roots and spans the years from Sharpeville through Soweto in a moving fashion, made all the more poignant and terrifying because she does not raise her voice or adopt a tone of militant stridency. For Afrikaners unfamiliar with the details of black life as lived by people such as Poppy, there can be no resort to blaming the novel on agitators, or on the foreign press, or on die Engelse. This isn't Alan Paton, with his searing indictment of the 1940s in Cry the Beloved Country. It is a ware (true) Afrikaans woman writing down Poppie's story of travail. It is hard to underestimate the psychological difference for most Afrikaners in reading the story in Afrikaans and not in English. The comprehension of words and of plot may be just the same, but the emotional impact of the anguish is far greater when the book is read in Afrikaans.

All of this accounts for the political criticism that the novel has evoked. To point out the tragedies that arise from "apartheid laws" is viewed as an attack on the system itself. In truth it is such an attack. And it comes at a time when apartheid thinking is crumbling. At the end of 1980, I was in South Africa with a distinguished black American. He is a Federal judge with wide experience in the kinds of discrimination that exist in the north as well as in the south of the United States. After traveling throughout the country and meeting individually and in groups with almost a thousand South Africans of all races, he was moved to conclude: "I haven't met anybody who will defend apartheid."

True, such people do exist. But the judge had met with the Minister of Police and with a large number of prominent Afrikaner judges, lawyers, businessmen, and newspaper editors. He was impressed with how rapidly the defense of racial discrimination has crumbled and is

still crumbling.

Poppie has played a role in this change of attitudes, which goes far beyond the merely cosmetics. Poppie is as important in the aggregate as it is difficult to quantify. Like most novels of its genre, the appeal of Elsa Joubert's novel has been greatest among the best educated and most influential Afrikaners. It has not been as widely read by young people as has some sugar-coated adolescent trivia. But even among those disposed to literary diabetes, I have found young people at Stellenbosch University who have read Poppie and can discuss the book intelligently.

Although "cosmetic" is the code word to minimize and denigrate racial changes in South Africa, the end of 1980 witnessed a cosmetic event with a generic symbolism far beyond the specific act. Heart surgeon Christiaan Barnard successfully transplanted the heart of Marita Muir, a young white South African receptionist, into the ravaged body of Gideon Meshack Wandera, a black customs inspector from Kenya. Beyond the operation itself, the lack of protest from racist quarters, which would have raised hell a decade ago, was encouraging.

MICHENER

James Michener, whose novel of Afrikaners, The Covenant, headed the New York Times best seller list, has this to say about recent moves toward racial justice in South Africa:

If hard-headed thoughtful Afrikaners are prepared to think of radical change, we Americans must be ready to support them. But that great change is inevitable I have no doubt whatsoever.

One fact that must be kept in mind is that almost no American has ancestors who have lived in America as long as the ancestors of Afrikaners have lived in South Africa. To tell them blandly to 'get out of Africa' when they have been there since 1652 is as unwarranted as to tell the people of Boston or New York to get out of America, since they arrived on our shores considerably later." (Personal letter to the Editor, Munger Africana Library Notes.)

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Elsa Joubert's heartfelt tocsin to her Afrikaner people is straightforward: Appreciate the travails of black people. Don't leave South Africa; save it. In creating a wide appreciation of the present fate of black people, Poppie and her family among them, the author has made a signal contribution towards verlig or enlightened racial attitudes.

We are grateful for the synopsis which follows to Klaas Steytler, Elsa Joubert's husband. It is reproduced by courtesy of Danie van Niekerk of Tafelberg Pers. Our thanks go also to Anneke Gerber for arranging the book reviews of Poppie, to Wilma Fairchild for editing, and to Linda Benjamin for typing it all.

Ned Munger

DIE SWERFJARE VAN POPPIE NONGENA

Bleak Horizon - and Poppie Nongena is the epic story of a black family who live in the north-western Cape Province of South Africa. They are peasants who three generations ago migrated from their traditional tribal territory.

In accord with the apartheid political dispensation in South Africa they are compelled to move from their home -- first to Cape Town, and then to their traditional "homeland," which is unknown to them. They find it difficult to adjust to urban life and the family experiences many problems. Dissatisfaction and political awareness lead to the riots of 1976.

The principal protagonist is Poppie Nongena, a Xhosa woman. The book describes her life from childhood until the age of 40, at which stage she is the mother of five and a grandmother. She is drawn against her wishes into political unrest. Apart from external political and social upheavals, she experiences from her youth -- and especially in the tribal area she is returned to -- the sharp conflict which involves all of Africa. Westernization (embodied in school and church) is in conflict with the traditional tribal rituals (embodied in ancestor worship, witch doctors and initiation rituals).

Above all, however, she is a mother-figure who fights to protect her children and their future. Her stature grows, in the words of a critic, to that of a Mother Courage of Africa.

The entire story is based on fact.

STORY-LINE

Poppie and her three younger brothers, Plank, Hoedjie and Mosie, grow up with their grandmother in Upington, a town situated in semi-desert. Their father has abandoned them long ago and their mother, Mama, works as a housemaid to support the children.

Grandma Hannie, who sells old bones and works as

a washer-woman for white people, is a faithful church-goer and the children feel protected by her presence. In the extended family system, Grandma Hannie's seven other children play parental roles, and the numerous nephews and nieces live together as brothers and sisters.

Mama, however, gains better-paid work in a fish-factory at Lambert's Bay, a fishing village on the west coast, north of Cape Town, and the children and Grandma Hannie journey there with her.

Poppie has to leave school to care for Mama's children from her common-law husband until she, also, can work at the factory (which employs 13-year-olds as "cleaners"). She loves her step-brothers and sisters, especially the youngest, Jakkie.

They live happily in the fishing village. Plank becomes a fisherman, Hoedjie is employed as a waiter at a hotel reserved for whites and Mosie attends school. When the season is good, they have sufficient money; if it is poor, they accept the inevitable. Their great sorrow is that Plank -- influenced by the other fishermen -- begins to drink heavily. However, this is accepted in the same manner as the illness and subsequent death of Grandma Hannie. Although they are Xhosas, as a family they are more fluent in Afrikaans and English than they are in Xhosa, and their relationship with the brown people among whom they live is good. For three generations they have had no direct contact with the Ciskei and Transkei -- the original lands of the Xhosa. Among themselves, they refer to these areas disparagingly as "the land," or merely as "Kaffirland."

As a 16-year-old, Poppie falls in love with Stone Nongena, a migrant laborer from the Ciskei who adheres to Xhosa traditions.

He pays lobola (bride-price) for her and they marry in Grandma's Methodist church. Thereafter, the traditional Xhosa rituals are observed. With Stone, Poppie travels as a young woman for the first time to the Ciskei on holiday and finds the customs and lifestyle of the tribal Xhosas extremely strange.

Political complications in South Africa force their way into their lives shortly after the birth of their son, Bonsile. The black people of Lambert's Bay are told that they must move to Nyanga, a new black township near Cape Town, because the west coast has become a preferential labor area for the brown people.

Mama, the stepfather, the half-brothers and sisters, Mosie, Hoedjie and Plank leave for the Cape. Later, when life at Lambert's Bay -- and official pressure on black people -- becomes too severe, Poppie and Stone follow.

The family finds it very difficult to adjust to life in the city. Mama and the stepfather are compelled to marry in a church in order to qualify for a dwelling; Stone has to undertake contract (temporary "guest" labor) so as to obtain a plot on which to erect a corrugated-iron shack. The brothers obtain work, but Hoedjie begins to drink as heavily as Plank, and life in the new squatter-camp is rough and dangerous. Money is scarce, there is insufficient housing and the skollies (hooligans) carry knives when they rob their own people. A fresh threat now rears its head -- a stricter application of the pass law. Women, also, are compelled to be in possession of pass books. Even when they visit friends in neighboring townships, Poppie and her brothers have to obtain permits.

Dissatisfaction in the black areas grows. After the eruption at Sharpeville in the north, unrest spreads southwards to the Cape. In 1960, Poppie and her family experience the great strike in Cape Town.

Although she is at home with three young children, and Stone is ill and in any event unable to attend work, she worries intensely about her brothers. Towards the end of the strike she witnesses the stoning of her neighbor, Mr. Mfukeng -- a police informer -- by her own countrymen. He dies on the street.

Even the cessation of the strike fails to herald peace and rest. Stone cannot adjust to the exacting demands of urban life, which unsettle and frighten him; he becomes chronically ill. First he suffers from a light form of tuberculosis. After a long sojourn in hospital he regains his health -- and is stricken by chronic nausea. He is soon unemployed. Poppie is compelled to leave the children to their own devices at home and to find work. She is employed as a char and for years the family exists in poverty. Each day becomes a struggle for survival. Plank works on the boats as a fisherman. Hoedjie is married to Muis and both are habitually drunk. Only Mosie lives with her, and because he is unmarried, assists her in the support of the children.

Mama's life is also exacting. The stepfather is miserly and malevolent, and she finds it difficult to maintain her family in a decent manner. She also works

as a housemaid in the city.

Because the Cape Peninsula and its vicinity become a preferential labor area for brown people, the law affects the family there, also. New legislation for blacks employed in the Cape makes it necessary for them to carry -- in addition to the pass -- a special work permit. In order to obtain one, an individual has to have been resident in the Cape for 15 years or to have worked uninterruptedly for one employer for 10 years. Mama, the brothers and the stepfather are granted permits. Poppie is refused one, partly because she is married to a "guest" laborer, and partly because of the employment stipulation. She is told to return to her territory of origin -- an area she has had no contact with.

Because she feels that she has a right to be in the Cape, Poppie will not agree to leave. She queues for hours at the offices of the Bantu Administration Board to explain that her husband has been unable to work because of illness and that she has small children to support -- three, later four, then five children. She then asks for an extension to the permit allowing her to remain in the Cape. For 10 years she queues every two to three months to obtain extensions. She reproaches herself for having married a man from Kaffirland, although she could not have foreseen what legislation would be introduced. She turns against Stone when he consults witch doctors for medicine when the doctors at Groote Schuur Hospital cannot help him. She remains faithful to her church and begins to feel that her departure from the Cape may be God's will. For her, there is no alternative.

But where can she go? Stone's parents are elderly and live in a primitive hut in a mountain settlement in the Ciskei. She cannot live there with five children. She has no immediate family or friends in the Ciskei or Transkei.

However, when the Government erects three large townships in the Ciskei and she is promised a four-roomed house and a school for her children, she gives in. She is weakened by the birth of her fifth child, wearied by nursing a sick man, caring for children and working. She is spiritually ill from having to beg to remain where she feels she belongs. Also, Mosie has married, and she feels her brothers can survive without her care.

In January 1971 she and her five children are put on a train and resettled in the Ciskei at Mdantsane,

a new residential area for blacks just outside East London. Stone, as a "guest" laborer, is permitted to remain in the Cape. Because there is no work for him in East London, they decide that he should remain in the township as the bread-winner.

Poppie and her children experience four difficult years in an alien area where the people and their manners, the climate, the circumstances, are strange. They, as people from the Cape who cannot even speak Xhosa correctly, are regarded as intruders. After two years Stone visits them, but he has deteriorated and they begin to bicker about the future of the children. He feels that his daughters should live with and care for his parents on the "land," but Poppie opposes this vehemently -- even hardheartedly. Her existence in Mdantsane is motivated by her desire to educate her children, so that they will not have to suffer as she has. Moreover, they are clever, hard-working children. When Stone wishes Bonsile -- the eldest son -- to accompany him to the "land" to attend a traditional tribal ritual (the slaughter of an ox after the death of a relative) she refuses to allow it. Bonsile must study.

Although Poppie, as a Xhosa woman, can appreciate the necessity for tribal rituals, Christianity and education have priority.

In 1974, just before the children are due to return to school, Poppie receives the news that Stone has died in the Cape. As a last refuge, he had again visited a witch doctor, whose powerful potion caused his death. Poppie and the children travel to the Cape to attend the funeral. She realizes how Stone had neglected himself in his attempt to support her and the children. As she gazes at the emaciated body in the coffin she wonders where she had chosen the wrong path.

Now she has to make decisions for her family. Although Mama and Mosie want her and the children to live with them in Cape Town, it is forbidden by law. Neither she nor her children can obtain permits entitling them to work or to attend school, and they risk arrest if they remain. In Mdantsane, there is no worthwhile employment.

She decides after all to send the girls to Stone's parents on the "land." The girls are extremely reluctant; they dislike the primitive conditions in the tribal territory and do not know their grandparents. However, Poppie forces them to accept her decision. Bonsile can remain in the house in Mdantsane and

continue his studies. If she lets a section of the house, she can even profit. The two small children can live illegally with Mosie -- children are not asked to produce passes -- and she, without a work permit and at her own risk, will take on housework at the Cape, because wages there are double those in East London.

Her plan works well, she even succeeds in again obtaining a temporary work-permit, but through dreams she begins to experience psychic disturbances. She feels that she must fulfill Stone's desire to have Bonsile undergo tribal rituals in the "land." Initially, she refuses the grandfather's request that Bonsile visit the "land." In her reply to his letter she writes that he must first complete his schooling. However, when the father-in-law dies, and the dreams that plague her intensify, she gives in. She leaves her work, Mama and Mosie support her financially, and she takes Bonsile to the "land" to undergo the traditional initiation ritual. She feels that in whatever way the Xhosa traditions (the dark, mysterious rituals, the dancing and feasting) begin to take possession of her, she must steel herself not to submit to the almost hypnotic group-consciousness. Memories of church-singing in her youth help her to resist the primitive -- which is also present in her. One of her daughters, Thandi, manifests the psychic power which makes it apparent that she will become a witch doctor. This severely disturbs Poppie.

Because of the time devoted to the ritual, the children all lose a full school year. Bonsile is compelled to work to earn money. On her way back to Cape Town, Poppie visits East London and finds that an illegitimate child fathered by Bonsile was born on the day Stone died. This makes the neglected, ill and backward child precious. She takes responsibility for the child and they return to Cape Town together. In exchange, she has to leave Fezi, her favorite son, with Bonsile. She feels that little by little, everything precious to her is being stripped away. Yet she promises herself and the children that one day they will be together again.

She returns to work and saves from the beginning so that the children can attend school the following year.

In 1976 political complications once again involve the family. Unrest erupts in June at Soweto, Johannesburg, and shortly afterwards spreads to the Cape. The children burn down schools, libraries, administration offices, and post and pass offices. They refuse to attend school and launch a crusade against the

drunkenness which, to a large extent, has destroyed the lives of their parents and themselves. Although Poppie sympathizes with the rioters, she is grateful that her children in the Ciskei are not endangered.

For her, a disturbing feature of the unrest is the antagonism which develops between the two Xhosa groups -- the migrant laborers and the established city-dwellers ("townborners"). The migrants who drink oppose the actions of the children. Poppie believes that the people should stand together, for the children are fighting for the rights of all.

Mama's youngest child, Jakkie, is now 22 years old, and after working for a few years, has returned to school. He is actively involved in the unrest and they are all concerned for his safety.

On Boxing Day, 1976, while Poppie, her youngest daughter and Bonsile's child are in the township, bloody fights erupt between two Xhosa groups, the city dwellers and the migrant laborers.

The police arrive and Poppie sees them shoot at the city-dwellers; thus taking the side of the migrants. Bonsile's child, which Poppie is carrying on her back, is struck by a brick hurled by a migrant, and dies.

Dissatisfaction in the black townships continues. The young people who control the uprising begin to work in secret, and Jakkie is suspected of revolutionary activities. When a policeman attempts to arrest him, he tugs out a revolver and shoots him. He flees. After some months, he arrives in East London. He asks Bonsile to help him and to take him to Herschel, where the girls are living on the "land." Once there, it is a simple matter to slip across the border into Lesotho. The police are informed and Poppie's children are detained in Herschel.

They are released, but Poppie realizes that the lives of her children, which she wishes to protect at all costs, must now take their course. They, too, are born to destinies over which she has no control. What will be, will be.

This synopsis was written by Klaas Steytler, Elsa Joubert's husband, and is reproduced by courtesy of Mr. Steytler and Tafelberg Pers.

Documentary

Paul Ableman

Poppie Elsa Joubert (Hodder £6.50)

The word 'novel' is imprecise and is applied to many works which are really thinly disguised autobiographies. But however a novel be defined, *Poppie* is certainly a borderline case. As far as I can ascertain, the book consists of the oral memoirs of a black Xhosa woman taken down by Elsa Joubert and presented to us with little changed other than personal names. Elsa Joubert herself is a white, Afrikaner woman of French Huguenot descent. *Poppie* describes a way of life that Miss Joubert admits is alien to her. She has done an efficient and useful job of editing and selecting but she has not written a novel.

What she has given us is a documentary about the life of black South Africans and very moving it is. For all that, I missed the novelist's skill and longed for faces and places to be brought to life as only an artist can contrive. The flat style of *Poppie* (or rather of her original) takes us into her mind and responses but we have to do a great deal of 'piecing out' her imperfections with our thought. Somewhere behind her painful story, we sense the great cities and greater plains, the mountains and sea, the people and industry, and all the other aspects of the huge, riven nation at the foot of Africa but they are not vividly evoked in words.

Still there is no doubt that this book conveys the reality of apartheid in a way that no amount of statistics and journalistic reports could do. There are violent incidents and examples of inhumanity in its pages but they do not set the tone. Indeed, the handful of whites (and one of the startling revelations is how little contact there is between the races) that figures individually is mostly decent or even benign. No, it is the grinding harshness of an unjust society which mobilises our indignation. And the failure of justice derives not from the well-known fact that the huge majority of the population enjoys only a small proportion of the available resources but from the (for both races) spiritually ruinous circumstances that one race dictates the condition of the other.

Even if the whites were improbably to decree that they themselves should inhabit the shanty-towns and the blistering huts on the plains while the blacks basked in air-conditioned luxury and drove big cars, the basic injustice of apartheid would persist. It resides in the fact that the blacks have no, or very little, control over their own lives and all the fine words about separate but equal development (even if it were true) cannot obliterate the fact that this situation is a form of slavery. No individual white man in South Africa can lawfully beat a black man

to death, as in the slave plantations of the American pre-civil war South, but the corporate white man of South Africa can, and does, oppress and degrade the corporate black man. The Afrikaner talks about preserving his culture and defending his values even as he debases the former and pollutes the latter by policies incompatible with civilisation.

Poppie is born to weep but her girlhood, though harsh, is tolerably happy. She marries a good man, Stone, in late girlhood and then her troubles, which are a paradigm of the troubles of the whole black nation, begin. Blacks find it impossible to earn more than survival wages and they are harassed perennially by laws designed to implement white aspirations. *Poppie* starts bearing children. She and Stone are separated. Her beloved brothers begin taking the only path out of white South Africa available to blacks, through the neck of a bottle. Pass laws channel *Poppie* into endless queues for reserved residence and other permits. Family ties are strong and a heartening aspect of this book is that it reveals a society which, while grievously deprived of worldly goods, is still rich in human relationships.

The cash nexus, if only because there is so little cash about, has small influence on South Africans with black skins. But strong though they are, family ties are not strong enough to keep families from being repeatedly scattered by economic and legal pressures. In the corrugated-iron huts and bare little concrete houses, members of families reunite for a day or a month before being once more dispersed by the endless quest for a bit more money or security or freedom from legal persecution.

After years in Capetown (or rather in the structured rubble-heap which the blacks inhabit there), *Poppie* is finally driven out by the pass laws for a two-day train journey to the dreaded 'red-mealie' lands where all is raw, barren and primitive. Her husband, now tubercular and dying, stays behind to work in a garage and send her money. *Poppie* makes some kind of life for herself and her three children in the Ciskei.

There are debts aplenty, from disease and drink and gun. But some of the young ones survive and some of the survivors manage, against great odds, to acquire the rudiments of education and to begin planning a new dispensation in South Africa. *Poppie* herself is too conservative to feel much other than alarm at the risks generated by the new militancy. She takes comfort in her strong Christianity and equally strong Xhosa traditionalism. Her hybrid, but perfectly valid, culture is a fascinating aspect of the book. *Poppie* spends all night singing hymns in church and the next day goes off to purchase a goat to be sacrificed at her son's circumcision ceremony in the bush.

'I could not afford an ox for the feast, but I slaughtered two sheep, and we had enough beer and bread and stamped mealies and ginger beer and Kool-aid, and other cool drinks, our own home-made drinks.'

SOUTH AFRICA'S MOTHER COURAGE

Her name is Poppie Nongena. Now 40, she is a black woman whose tale of suffering under apartheid—South Africa's web of white-supremacist laws—reflects the bleak and faceless existence of thousands of similar women. But never again can any literate South African say: "We never knew." In a book that has become an overnight sensation, novelist Elsa Joubert has evoked Poppie's story in such moving detail that even staunch Afrikaners are questioning their nation's harsh racial policies.

On Christmas Day in 1976, Poppie showed up at the Cape Town home of Joubert. "She just had the need to talk to somebody," recalls the novelist, who tape-recorded their conversations. "The Wandering Years of Poppie Nongena," largely based on those tapes, unfolds like a Greek tragedy, and the heroine is described by one critic as "Mother Courage."

HARSH LAWS. Poppie's husband fell ill with tuberculosis and she was forced to support him and her five children. As a city housemaid, she often "stept in," prevented by the harsh pass laws from seeing her family more than a few hours a week. After years of fending off the white bureaucracy, she finally failed to qualify for a work permit, and was "resettled" with her children in a rural tribal area that was theoretically her "homeland," but which she had never seen before.

"If it is the Lord's will that you go, you will go," said the pass-office official. Poppie



Striking a chord of guilt

didn't cry when the train left the station, but when she arrived at her new home, she felt she had been "thrown away." And because there was no work in the resettlement camp, her husband had to remain near Cape Town to try to earn a living.

But Poppie's greatest tragedy was the 1976 rioting in the black township of Langa. Flaming from a clash between blacks and white policemen, her grandchild—whom she carried on her back—was struck by a brick and killed. By that time, too, her nightmare had come true: her children had become revolutionaries.

"My poor lost little lamb, has it caught

up with you?" she asks in the book. "I who thought: you're out of trouble, let the other children burn and throw stones and be shot and beaten in the cities, you are out of it all. For you I suffered so that you could live in peace and go to school, away from it all. And now it has caught up with you, too."

CAMPUS DEBATE. Joubert's book has won three South African literary awards and has been suggested as compulsory reading in South African schools. The letters columns of Afrikaans newspapers have been filled with commentary, much of it from guilt-stricken Afrikaners. And it has touched off a debate on South Africa's campuses. Recently, Prof. Johan Degenaar, head of the department of political philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, called apartheid laws "structural violence" for which the Afrikaners were to blame.

Poppie is now living in a remote tribal homeland and has not read the book that has made her a household word throughout the country. "The Bible is enough for me," she recently told Joubert. But Joubert hopes that Poppie's story may help bring about a change of heart on the part of South Africa's white supremacists. "I know people who are very *verkramp*—right wing—and they have told me that they didn't know the black man was a person," she said last week. "They say when they see a black person waiting for a bus or working they wonder now for the first time where they're going, and about their families."

ANGUS DEMING with PETER YOUNGHUSBAND in Cape Town

YORKSHIRE POST October 23, 1980

POPPIE. By Elsa Joubert (Hodder & Stoughton, £6.50). This novel, based on the life story of a Black woman living in South Africa today, describes the heartless system of apartheid from the inside. Its simple understatement of what it is like to be born Black achieves a dramatic intensity. Yet it is no political tract, simply a story of how the human spirit in one woman can survive the brutality of life. Andre Brink describes it as a "vision of human bondage . . . of epic breadth." Poppie was originally published in Afrikaans and became an award-winning best-seller in South Africa. This fact must give some grounds for hope that that country is creeping closer to opening its eyes to what it is doing to its fellow countrymen. J.P.

PETER VAN RYNEVELD writes:

LEES die volgende bewerings of uitroepe:

- "Die Kleurling raak so dikwels dronk".
- "Al ding wat die swartman wil hê is 'n paar vroue en 'n pondok in die tuisland. Hy is nie winsgeïntereerd nie."
- "Jou Hotnot!"

Onwaarhede? Veralgemenings? Afbrekende uitroepe? Amper elke dag op Stellenbosch hoor 'n mens hierdie tipes stellings, asof hulle aanvaarde feite van die samelewing is. Nee, dit behoort nie so te wees nie. Is daar nie iets verkeerd nie? Soos Shakespeare geskryf het: "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark".

At a SAAK meeting last year a young African girl, who was a member of the Mowbray Inter-Race Group, told the pathetically small number of Maties who attended the meeting, why she was sad. Speaking in English, she explained: we white people who run the country think we know what is best for the Africans, the Coloured, the Asians and the Whites in South Africa. We think we know how the 'average' African thinks, how he does not need much money, how he is happy to walk to work, how he likes to drink a lot, and so on. She was sad that we who are educated people think that way, because it is not so. Many Africans have the same hopes and aspirations that white people have. They want to own a decent home and a car, and to have their family with them. They are after all people. And, like us, they would like to be treated as people, not as second or third class humans.

POPPIE'S STRUGGLE

Much has been written and discussed recently about Elsa Joubert's book "Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena". The story deals largely with Poppie's struggle to find stability and security for herself and her family within the system of apartheid. It is not intended to be a political book. Elsa Joubert says: "My purpose was to break a barrier of ignorance" (*Argus* January 16). The book is based on a true story.

Many people have responded to the book. A woman in hospital wrote to Elsa Joubert saying that she saw the

person who served her tea in a different light - that she was a person, not just a worker. "They see black people as fellow citizens and human beings" (*Argus* January 16).

This is my point: as was realized in Denmark, something has to change, and what is needed in South Africa is a change in *attitude* between South Africans; it is a change that must come from the heart as well as the mind. A society ultimately depends not upon the ruler of that society, but rather upon the people who make the rules. We in South Africa are not perfect people, but we claim to belong to a society based on Christian principles, one of which is love your neighbour as you love yourself. Whom do you regard as your neighbour?

Surely then, our great need in South Africa at present is to break down many of the barriers of ignorance and preconceived ideas that exist between our different racial groups. I wonder if it is not apartheid - in schools, residential areas, cinemas, beaches, etc. that is the rule which prevents us from destroying the rot that has set into our society.

(To be continued - Editor.)

Book reviews

Epic encounter between African and Afrikaner

POPPIE NONGENA, by Elsa Joubert (Tafelberg)

Reviewed by Rylie van Renssen, formerly Assistant Editor of "Rapport"

Poppie Rachel Nongena (born Matati) isn't her real name. But that is just about all that isn't true in *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (The Wandering Years of Poppie Nongena). This book has shaken Afrikaans speaking South Africa as no other in many, many years.

It is the taped life story of an Afrikaans speaking black domestic worker in Cape Town. She told it to foremost Afrikaans novelist and former journalist, Elsa Joubert, shortly after the turbulent events of 1976. A time when — as Poppie's Buti Mosele says in this book — things were terrible indeed, but something in one's heart said: At last.

Poppie was born at Upington in the North-western Cape. As the historian G. M. Theal also tells, some Xhosa tribespeople had settled there during the nineteenth century, marrying into the coloured community and to a considerable extent adopting Afrikaans as their first language, but keeping traditions such as the Abakheiba, loloba, etc.

As a young girl Poppie works in the canning factory at Lambert's Bay on the West Coast. She marries the shy young Xhosa, Stone Nongena, from the Herschel district (in what has since become Transkei), who has been working on the West Coast fishing fleets.

When the families of black workers are evicted from Lambert's Bay, Poppie is told to go to Cape Town. And so she lands in the squatters' camp of Jakkalsvlei where her mother and some brothers already are, and the long battle with passes and permits begins: to find somewhere to live, to find some way to earn enough to give their children an educated future.

Stone follows her and becomes a contract worker who can never qualify for permanent residence and must live in the Bachelors' Quarters. Poppie becomes alternatively clear and sleep-in. She has again and again, almost from month to month for years on end, to cajole, scheme and beg to have her permit renewed.

Eventually she despairs and accepts a home-lands house for her and her children in far-away Mdantsane, where she has never been and knows no-one. From there she comes back because she can no longer, after Stone's death in Cape Town,

earn enough to keep her children at school. So she is in Jakkalsvlei at the time of the nylonos (police vans) and the terror of the riots . . .

Poppie tells her story — which Elsa Joubert has brilliantly edited — in the lively, racy Afrikaans she grew up with. She tells it all, the fun as well as the hardships, in a manner which brings the warm fellowship, the richness and also the many tensions of black township life alive as never before in Afrikaans.

And in the unbelievable fortitude and strong faith with which this woman faces up to blow after blow that life deals her, the readers of Poppie recognise that rare quality, true greatness.

Poppie's real name is being kept a close secret so that she shouldn't get into trouble with the authorities — because of troubles, oh of troubles! this woman has had enough. But whoever she is, she could not have dreamt that her story would have such enormous effect.

Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena (published by Tafelberg) is being considered for two of the major literary prizes of the year. A bumper first edition was sold out within a month and the second edition is being snapped up.

The whole book is being serialised by *Rapport*, the Afrikaans Sunday paper. *Fair Lady* is publishing a number of translated extracts. The book itself is being translated into English and into French. In the Free State it is being produced as a play.

The whole Afrikaans speaking community (and beyond) seems to be taking Poppie to its heart. As one reader put it: "For the first time, you know, I'm really looking at my char, at a black person crossing the street, and wondering: are you also battling with permits in order to be near your husband? are you having trouble with the schooling of your children? with unemployment and sickness in your family? with housing? police raids?"

In the nineteenth century Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book which opened people's eyes to the full horror of slavery and no played a major role in the abolition of that evil. Who knows what role Poppie and Elsa's book is perhaps yet, to play in South Africa?

The first instalment of the abridged English translation "Poppie" appeared in "Fair Lady" of April 11. Elsa Joubert's experiences while writing the book, which appear in a separate article, are particularly interesting.

Power and cruelty

Hilary Bailey reviews new fiction

Whereas the samurai culture distorts lives gently, like training a bonzai tree, South Africa just smashes them. Working, scrabbling for passes, always moving in response to race laws and family and tribal pressures, caught up in riots, Elsa Joubert's heroine, Poppie, has her life perpetually broken in pieces by the combined pressures of being a woman, a mother, a worker and, above all, a black South African. Every time she patiently sticks together the fragments; every time they are shattered apart again.

For two years Elsa Joubert took down the details of an actual woman's life and the result, simply written in the language she might have used, is a novel in spite of itself. *The Book*, lacking comment, sentiment, fine writing, or any construction other than that of Poppie's life, achieves the status of a work of imagination in a curious way — it is as if Poppie's eternal quest for stability and better times, in the face of impossible odds, is like a triumph of imagination in itself. This gives the book a unity and, indeed, a kind of grandeur.

THE GUARDIAN October 9, 1980

Three in a row

Novelist Elsa Joubert has won her third major literary award within a week for her work, *Die Swertjare van Poppie Nongena*.

The book, which deals with a Black woman and her family, has won prize money totalling R16 000.

Mrs Joubert received the first award, the R1 000 W A Hofmeyr prize for the best book published by Nasionale Boekhandel, last Friday. On Wednesday the book also received the CNA prize worth R2 000.

Then the Louis Luyt prize worth R10 000 (plus a study bursary worth R2 500) was awarded to Mrs Joubert.

Audrey Blignault writes in *Die Burger* that the book was published in November 1978 and is already in its third reprint.

Poppie goes worldwide July 20, 1979.

The extremely successful Afrikaans novel, *Die Swertjare van Poppie Nongena*, by Elsa Joubert, has been translated into English by the author and is to be published soon by Hodder and Stoughton in London under the probable title of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*.

In monetary terms, *Poppie* is already one of the most successful books in Afrikaans literature, writes Jaap Boekkooi in *The Star*.

It has been serialised in two South African weeklies and has so far earned Miss Joubert about R30 000 in royalties. The book has also received the CNA, Louis Luyt and Hofmeyer awards.

Negotiations are on hand to translate the story into French, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian and, possibly later, into German and Dutch as well.

Thomas Hinde

I have insufficient space to do justice to Elsa Joubert's *Poppie*. All who are interested in South Africa will read it with fascination. Those who were not when they began will be by the end.

For a hundred pages I wondered whether it should correctly be called a novel or documentary, since it claims to be the true life-story of a black South African girl with nothing changed except her name. Thereafter the cumulative dismay produced by Poppie's evidence made such a question seem unimportant.

The claim is anyway disingenuous. By ending her account of Poppie's life with the death of her grandchild in the riots of 1975 and by telling it largely in Poppie's words, Miss Joubert makes just the sort of transformation of the objective world into art which any novelist makes.

The great merit of "*Poppie*" is that it does not merely arouse indignation against the South African Government (which seems so largely to have brought its troubles on itself) but raises the much wider question of whether an society can function once traditional beliefs, and in particular respect of the old by the young, have been destroyed.

The book, originally written in Afrikaans and now translated by the author into English, became the centre of political controversy when it was published in South Africa two years ago. I'm not surprised. The simplicity with which Poppie tells her story makes it entirely convincing and her lack of bitterness or political sophistication are more moving than any rhetoric.

Hermione Lee

Joubert's narrative seems, initially, plodding and ingenuous. Poppie is the story of a black South-African woman of Xhosa ancestry whose family moved to Cape Town and, after lifetimes of bitter hardship, came to grief at the time of the Soweto riots. It was told to Ms Joubert, who has translated her semi-documentary novel from Afrikaans into English. The English reader, faced with maps, family trees, glossaries, and a long text packed with Afrikaans phrases and flatly rendered facts, may feel that it's only the enormity of the events which validates the novel. There's little sense of character, and all too much ethnic detail: 'We liked ouma's griddle cakes too, and umphokogo, a crumbly porridge we ate with sour milk'

But it would be wrong to be put off. 'Poppie' is informative, especially about

the Xhosa woman's status in marriage — having to please her husband's family as much as him — about the conflict between tribal rituals and the church, and about the gap between Poppie's war-time generation and the one growing up after Sharpeville. Very slowly, the grinding details—the appalling living and working conditions in Cape Town, of Poppie's degrading 10-year struggle for a resident's pass, of her eviction to a desolate location near East London—become painfully absorbing. It's interesting that André Brink praises 'Poppie,' for he deals with the complex political position of the Afrikaner, while Joubert suppresses that viewpoint to show what an ordinary, essentially apolitical black woman's attempt at the dignity of a stable family life must be like under apartheid.

Poppie resists being 'thwasa' (psychic) in order to survive. In *The Beekeepers*, Peter Redgrove's latest ebullient exploration of man's 'nether powers,' two poets, one middle-aged, one old, cultivate their 'thwasa' potential as a cure for alcoholism. The premise, as in all Redgrove's work, is that 'we have evolved because certain characteristics, including a receptivity that would hold us spellbound and helpless with sensed detail, have been bred out of us.'

SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

"TALKING OF BOOKS"

Review by Alan Lennox-Short

I had three reasons for thinking that I should guard against a loaded assessment of "THE LONG JOURNEY OF POPPIE NONGENA", the English version of Elsa Joubert's 'Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena'. The English version has, by the way, been published by Jonathan Ball in association with Hodder and Stoughton.

My first reason for fearing a biased verdict was that the novel has already had an enthusiastic reception in its Afrikaans form. Secondly, we tend to be over-emotional about books which have as their themes sympathetic accounts of the struggles and aspirations of South African browns and blacks. Thirdly, it is only very rarely indeed that a translation can be an adequate version of its original, even if, as in this instance, it has been reported that the translator is the author herself.

But I need not have worried. This novel, even in translation, is an admirable achievement which fully deserves yet another success, an achievement attained without apparent effort. Of course, it is easy to say that the novel must necessarily ring true because it is a chronicle of a family carefully pieced together from the accounts of living and largely told by Poppie herself. But it is one thing to collect raw material; it is quite another to fashion it, to mould it, to mother it so that it retains and remains reality. It is partly in this that the novel's merit lies. Directly, naturally, without sentimentality or political passion, with a poignant simplicity of material and style that very often reaches its height at the end of a chapter, it gives us the struggles and reverses and victories of a Xhosa family who, wanting to remain in Cape Town, are caught up in the meshes of bureaucracy and engulfed in political unrest that begins with Sharpeville.

But the book is far more than a tale feeding on facts ennobled by simplicity. From one aspect, the novel is Poppie herself...her patience, her endurance, her resilience, her resignation - even if as a character she is not fully fleshed. One of the virtues of the style, incidentally, is the fidelity with which it matches Poppie's personality.

But Poppie is representative, is universal. It is through her that we realize that personal relationships can surmount mass reactions, and it is through her that we appreciate more fully the divisions and the political turbulence that have from time to time convulsed South Africa. It is through her that we become sharply conscious of the differences between the rural and the town African, the inroads of modernity into tribal custom, the revolt of black and brown child against black and brown adult, the reactions of individuals to violence, intimidation, pressures from both white and black.

Nor is reality dimmed because it is filtered through a personality. It gains in intensity, not merely because the reactions of blacks can very often be remote from whites, but because here we have the perfect union of large events and their impact on those caught up in them.

I hope that I have said enough to convey to you and to justify my convictions that Elsa Joubert's "THE LONG JOURNEY OF POPPIE NONGENA" is ... and fully deserves to be ... one of the classics of South African literature.

The authentic voice of black working people

Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena. By Elsa Joubert (Tafelberg)

NEVER before has the odyssey of the black man in apartheid-land been so clearly, so dramatically described as in this new documentary novel by Elsa Joubert. Nobody can read "Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena" and remain ignorant of the tremendous social upheaval taking place all around our pampered lives.

The reason? In this book black Afrikaners speak with their own authentic voices poor, working-class people with no ulterior political motives, no racial hatred, only intent on obtaining a pass, keeping the family together somehow, keeping alive somehow.

No intellectual

The vast majority of books by Africans written in English read like embittered political tracts — because their authors are intellectuals, linguistic schizoprenics writing in somebody else's language. Poppie Nongena however, is no intellectual, and she was born Afrikaners. She, or rather black women over a long period, did not write the book — that was Elsa Joubert's work — but spoke their word in their daily, living speech.



And what a fantastic revelation this black world beside ours is! I had never imagined that the family could be the exclusive, ramifying basis of a culture. If I had as many blood and small and great relatives as Poppie all relying on me, I'd run away. But here they mesh together in Poppie's life, as naturally as the roots of a great tree. First impression of the book, overwhelmingly so: the family.

I do not wish to spoil the book by telling too much of Poppie's *swerfjare*, years of wandering. Allow me a quick summary. She was born in Upington, an Afrikaans-speaking black. After a move to Lambert's Bay for work, government regulations moved them all to Cape Town, where Poppie Nongena, married to a Xhosa from Herschel, had to learn Xhosa, to become Xhosa, and in the weekly, monthly, unceasing, utterly wearying struggle to obtain labour and residence passes was finally banished to Aldantsane in the Ciskei. Aldantsane, like Dimbaza, a brand-new place with houses to live in but with nowhere to work. Her husband, Stone, male, Xhosa, born in Xhosenland, was allowed as migrant labourer to stay in Cape Town. But she, female, born Afrikaners in the Cape, was forced to leave and go to a foreign Xhosa world. So the queer discrimination of apartheid against women decreed.

In her heart Poppie remained a stranger to Xhosenland and its ways. Her heart was still in Cape Town where her husband

and relatives were. Notwithstanding her determination never again to go and stand in those exhausting queues before the pass office to wait for the god-like official stamp granting you the right to be where you were for another three or six months, she wanted to return.

Meanwhile the children grew up, seeing, knowing their parents' humiliation. Sharpeville, Langa, came in 1960. Then Soweto, Cape Flats, 1976. This time the children took over. You were no good before, you ran away, they said, now we will face the police. The strange thing is that Poppie Nongena had no hatred, and that the apartheid officials show up remarkably well in her recounting. For the children in the last section of Poppie's years of wandering, some of them squatters at Crossroads, a different story will have to be told.

The language rings fresh and true, for it is the proletarian speech used throughout the western half of South Africa, a direct, earthy Afrikaans spiced with some English or Xhosa words in literary use, for the first time in a skilful novelist's hands. It has an even more exciting and humorous impact.

No wonder "Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena" is a most readable book, something between good reportage and good novelistic composition. It must have taken a lot of planning and shaping to dramatize the labyrinthine family relationships and happenings taken for granted by the participants. For that reason the book opens with two family trees.

It is a quite long family chronicle, related to the Scandinavian sagas in its scope and historical import, breath-taking in its truthful picture of a South Africa most whites only vague-



Elsa Joubert

ly know about it is, above all, a book all white South Africans should read. Not at all because it is a sermon against the evils of trek labour, sundering families apart. On the contrary, Poppie's wanderings are not in search of hate, but simply of human warmth and trust. What she unwittingly does teach is an answering warmth in our hearts.

So right it is that it should be women white and black, to bring us this strangely revealing tale from a world where men alone made the stunted laws. Laws of extraordinary discrimination against women. All honour to Elsa Joubert for writing the most important book of recent years.

Jan Rabie

RACE RELATIONS NEWS

February, 1979

Comment

What made "Poppie" pop?

Have you ever struggled to open the lid of a tight screwtop bottle? You strain and pant with effort, you try this trick and that, all to no avail. Eventually you give up — or you hand the thing over to someone else with the words: "Here, you try". You stand back to watch the other party's efforts with grim satisfaction.

But then, with a slight heave and twist — click — off it comes, leaving you saying: "Now why on earth wouldn't it do that for me?"

Some of us are feeling the same way at the moment about Elsa Joubert's newly published book: *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. This writer has in fact already authored several books on the problems of Africa and of black people.

In her latest novel, she writes of the extremely difficult and very human problems of a black South African woman, who encounters endless heartbreak when it comes to finding housing, work etc.

An unlikely subject as a bestseller among South African whites: but that's what it is. According to *Beeld* for instance, *Poppie Nongena* "has become a hit, the like of which has not been seen since André Brink's *Kennis van die Aand* and Etienne Leroux's *Sewê Dae by die Silbersteins*."

"The book is selling like hot cakes, spokesmen of bookshops in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town and Bloemfontein told *Beeld* yesterday," the newspaper reported on January 10.

The reason of course, is not the book's literary in the Afrikaans Press sparked by Prof J. J. Degebaar of Stellenbosch, who observed that the book is a good indication of structural violence within the South African system.

"Structural violence is found wherever there are discriminatory laws made by whites to regulate the lives of blacks for the advantage of the white lawmakers".

Elsa Joubert, he said, has made it clear that we cannot plead innocence by claiming later that

we did not know what our laws were doing to the individual black person.

To this a couple of his fellow professors, including Prof Sampie Terreblanche, reacted strongly as did several others in correspondence columns.

Although there were objections to the term "structural violence" (it was something thought of by the "socialists and leftists"), nonetheless along with *Poppie Nongena* it had suddenly gained a degree of respectability; hundreds, thousands of whites were reading about it and thinking about it.

One novelist and one professor putting down just one thought for a newspaper had succeeded in getting a message through where many other scholars and writers spending a great deal of time and money, had failed totally.

Click — the bottle top had come off.

In the case of the bottle, the explanation for the second party's success of course, lay in your previous efforts, which had loosened the top to a point where the application of force from a slightly different angle at last had the desired effect.

The same is true of what has been said for years by opponents of apartheid about the secret it had created. Although it all seemed to fall on deaf ears, the message was penetrating — even if only unconsciously.

Without that preliminary seed sowing, *Poppie Nongena* would probably never have popped.

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Elsa Joubert. *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. Cape Town. Tafelberg. 1978. 276 pages. 7.95 R.

The first edition of this remarkable narrative sold out in a matter of weeks. It was then serialized by the Afrikaans newspaper *Rapport*, won three literary awards in South Africa and occasioned dispute between Afrikaner academics. One of them, J. J. Degenaar, contends that *Swerfjare* exposes "the structural violence" of the laws pertaining to Africans, and that Afrikaners can no longer claim ignorance of the affect these laws are having on the lives of blacks. This book—arguably not a novel but a brilliant piece of New Journalism resulting from careful documentation—portrays the life of an extended family of Xhosa people, focusing mostly on Poppie Nongena, her husband and children.

We follow in close detail Poppie's own account of her life from childhood to middle age, an account which is rendered cohesive by the interpolations of an omniscient narrator who maintains the quality and rhythm of Poppie's speech. At first Poppie uses a northwest Cape Afrikaans which in time changes to one with greater Xhosa inflections and then changes again as her vocabulary is affected by the Cape Coloured people. Poppie's speech, her preoccupations and her emotions change with her various forced moves to different locations. Joubert's reconstruction of Poppie's day-by-day struggle with poverty, her frustrating efforts over ten years to obtain documents to remain with her husband, and her will to rebuild her life each time the authorities move her, has a cumulative and shocking effect on the reader.

The style is generally terse and objective, but because the story is told from the inside out we grow to know Poppie and are deeply moved by the tragedy that is her life. Elsa Joubert has transformed what might have been merely a sociological study into a work of art.

Sheila Roberts
Michigan State University

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 not fact-act, 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 'slaaf' for 'sleën', 'laai' 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 (located 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 oldest 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 Xhosa 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 Loo loves me, asa happye 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 by builders' rubble, where Poppie and the children camp on the floor the night of her arrival, with only the luggage tray brought with them on the train, and Poppie tries to express 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 feeling, 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's — and pregnant, approaches the influx control office for what she is certain will be her final decree of eviction, and overcomes with tension and nusses collapses against a lam:

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 Swerijere*, 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 lanka! moes gedoen het. Sisi... Net by gowermentsemense 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 overheid tease en soekry nie, of lat hulle my kar stop en skree donate' donate' totlat ek vir hulle petrol vir hulle petrol bombs uitfap 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 moelikheid gesoek nie'.

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

Reality, January 1980

April 4, 1979.

Elsa Joubert book a 'must' — Erika Theron

ELSA JOUBERT'S award-winning novel, *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, must be read by every social worker and social work student because it gives an insight into the life of the urban black which has never before been available.

This is the opinion of Professor Erika Theron of the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Social Work and editor of the professional journal, *Social Work*.

Writing in the journal Professor Theron says there is a certain form of poverty noticeable among many of South Africa's privileged people.

'It is a poverty of knowledge of the living conditions of particularly other population groups in their communities and

in the country as a whole,' Professor Theron writes.

'Although the book is specifically about black people and shows among other things how violently certain laws affect the lives of people, similar and other laws also affect the lives of the coloured people and Asians.'

Professor Theron says never again would social workers who work in white communities only and other people be able to say: 'But we did not know.'

There were hopeful signs of an increasing feeling that injustice had to be removed if it existed and had existed on a statutory level not because of a morbid realisation of guilt, but because it is felt that each of us has a responsibility which we have to accept fearlessly.'

Elsa Joubert has won R13 500 in the past week for *'Poppie Nongena'*, writes The Argus Johannesburg Correspondent.

In an unprecedented spate of awards for an Afrikaans novel Miss Joubert has won the CNA prize of R2 500, the W A Hofmeyr Prize of R1 000 and the R10 000 Louis Luyt Prize.

The book first appeared in November last year and was an immediate success. It sold out within a few weeks and will go into its third printing later this month.

The book tells the story of an Afrikaans-speaking Xhosa woman's vain struggle to create a stable life for her family under the apartheid system.

The book caused a stir in Afrikaans academic and political circles when it first appeared.

ELSA JOUBERT'S latest work, *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, became an overnight sensation with its hard and frank examination of the plight of a black woman under South Africa's apartheid laws. With the book now in its second printing and still in demand, O D WOLLHEIM examines the literary qualities of this remarkable book and concludes that it is a great Afrikaans work.

At one with Poppie

Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena, by Elsa Joubert (Tafelberg).

The first edition of Miss Joubert's book was sold out within a matter of a few months and the second printing is now in the bookshops.

What has made this book so sought after? There has been, it is true, a good deal of controversy about the book, but this has centred almost entirely upon the political implications of the story and whether the writer was trying to make a point or not. That could not have been the reason for the sensation the book has caused and we must look deeper for reasons.

The story is a simple one, told mostly by Poppie Nongena herself and otherwise biographically in Poppie's style by the writer of the factual course of events over the past 30 or more years. It is a true story which Miss Joubert must have garnered from dozens of long tape recorded conversations.

Poppie Nongena is a semi-detribalised African woman born in the north-western Cape whose home language is Afrikaans since she and her parents were born there. Her Afrikaans is a simple vernacular peculiar to people under these circumstances and is liberally laced with English and Xhosa words and phrases.

Their way of life is also a pot-pourri of Afrikaners (both brown and white), a little English and some ancient Xhosa customs, the last-named but indistinctly remembered.

This is the style in which the book is written and it lends authenticity to the story as did Alan Paton's style in *Cry the Beloved Country*. There is where the true literary greatness of this book must be sought.

Forces of circumstances — like the inexorable unfolding of a Greek tragedy — have led Poppie and her family from Upington to Lambert's Bay, to Crossroads, to Herschel, to Mdantsane and back to Crossroads. In each of these life style and the vernacular are different, often even far removed from what anything Miss Joubert could have experienced.

And yet she has been able to identify with every single episode of the epic story. The rural bred Africans from which Poppie's husband stemmed at Herschel are faithfully portrayed through Poppie's amazed and disconcerted eyes; the first arrival of Poppie at Mdantsane might have been Miss Joubert's own experience; the description of



Elsa Joubert

life at Lambert's Bay and at Crossroads is utterly authentic.

Elsa Joubert has not only identified with the character she writes about, she has become one with her and her powers of insight have enabled her to see everything through the eyes and nature and emotions of Poppie.

Andre Brink managed the same miracle with his banned book, *Kennis van die Aand*, but here one cannot resist the feeling that the story is fiction deliberately chosen to underline matters of which Brink disapproves.

The same cannot be said of Poppie's story. Nowhere is there the slightest indication of trying to make a point. Poppie tells her story in her simple, unvarnished and naive vernacular with little or no emotion coming through; nowhere does Miss Joubert use emotive terms or is one conscious of a manufactured scene or any distortion.

It is this utter and sincere veracity told in such simple terms which makes this book great and sends Miss Joubert into the small band of the top Afrikaans writers like Uys Krige, Jan Rabie, Etienne le Roux and their confires.

Thousands of Afrikaners have had Poppie Nongena working in their kitchens and as nursemaids; thousands have come to like these Poppies and often to identify with them and to help them in their difficulties.

Elsa Joubert has given them all the opportunity to see what their lives really are like because, although this is a true story of a particular family, its general principles apply to all urbanised Africans and to those others in the common areas on the Plateland.

It is this authenticity and the awakening Afrikaner conscience about what we do to blacks in the common area which has sold the book in addition to its sheer literary merit.

Nina Bawden

ALTHOUGH her heroine is black, the writer of "Poppie" is a white South African woman, Elsa Joubert. This, her

10th book, is the first of them she has translated from Afrikaans into English, and it is not only a compelling and dramatic novel but a considerable technical triumph. The author has listened to Poppie, got inside her skin, and told her story.

Poppie, a Xhosa, was born into comparative comfort in Cape Province. It is not until she marries and moves to Cape Town that she comes up against the cruel complexities of white bureaucracy. Her husband is allowed to stay because he is a migrant worker but the authorities insist that Poppie must live in the Ciskei, her husband's homeland — "Kaffirland," where the "raw people" live.

The novel relates, in precise and careful detail, Poppie's long fight against the Pass Laws, her endless struggle to feed and clothe her children and finally her defeated acceptance of the traditions of her husband's family. Against her own beliefs and education, she has to scrimp and save so that her son may be initiated into manhood in the tribal manner.

Though Poppie lives through Sharpeville, Soweto and the Cape riots, it is a measure of Elsa Joubert's achievement that her narrative never becomes a strident tract. The political events are in the background, Poppie's hopeless, gallant battle in the foreground, and this is how it should be.

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