

THE DIARY OF MARIA THOLO

by Carol Hermer. Ravan Press, Johannesburg.

Reviewed by Marie Dyer

The Diary of Maria Tholo recounts Maria Tholo's experiences during the riots in the black townships of Cape Town from August to October 1976. At that time she was running a crèche in Guguletu, as well as keeping house for her husband and two daughters. Her story has been put together in diary form by Carol Hermer from tape-recorded interviews conducted while the disturbances were going on; and the consequent immediacy of the events, as well as the obvious scrupulousness of the reporting, makes the diary an authentic and convincing document. Maria wasn't closely involved in any of the violence: no near relative of hers was arrested or injured, and neither of her daughters was attending high school. (It was the boycotting high-school students who were at the centre of the troubles). But nobody in Guguletu could avoid participation.

The particular interest of this book is in its 'insideness'. Many of the main incidents have been reported elsewhere from different points of view, and Carol Hermer adds to Maria's narrative a supporting commentary — including contemporary newspaper reports — giving a general account of the course of events. But the diary gives a view of vivid local details: the progress of a parents' meeting which the committee successfully keeps from being taken over by community council 'stooges'; schoolchildren, although continually harassed off the streets by police, appearing as if miraculously at a large gathering, having approached it with their uniforms concealed under raincoats or their mothers' overalls; the decision of the creche teachers to leave the doors open during any street riots, to avoid violence or subsequent reprisals from students fleeing from the police and wanting to run through; children so much in control of the society that even at a funeral feast they are served first; the fate of the large windows and expensive furniture of a prosperous shebeen, smashed to pieces among the bottles as the school-children pursue their campaign against liquor.

Some of the worst recollections of the riots are given new and horrifying life in Maria's first-hand accounts: the brutal beat-

ings and tear-gas attacks by police on children, even inside school grounds; the massive casualties; the large numbers of apparently random arrests and shootings; the encouragement by some police units of violence against the township residents by migrant workers in the hostels. (It was mainly the hostel dwellers in Nyanga who became aggressive; Maria suggests that the close proximity of the hostels to family houses there had resulted in a chronic state of social tension. She records relatively cordial relationships during the riots between the residents and the more suitably-sited hostels of Langa).

The diary is a record of Maria's experiences rather than an expression of her opinions, attitudes or feelings; and so although emotions like frustration — even desperation — distress, compassion, and horror are often revealed, there is often also an air almost of neutrality in the reporting, which is difficult to interpret. Like most adults in the townships, Maria seems to have been stimulated, excited, gratified by the original boycotts and demonstrations; and to have sympathised and identified — at least inwardly — with the students' militancy; but the students proceeded to direct their hostility not only against the authorities, but also — and ruthlessly — against adults who collaborated in any way; so that the students themselves became a threat which was difficult for the adults to respond to. Maria never offers any personal political judgement; although something of her allegiance can be deduced by the eagerness — almost avidity — with which she hastens to be present at or to witness any potentially significant action or confrontation, however exposed this may lead her to be, or however preoccupied she may have been with family or social affairs. (Various suburban activities like women's committee meetings or Tupperware parties obviously continued in Maria's circle during and in spite of the riots). But the book doesn't in fact set out to be any kind of personal testament: its combination of first-hand reporting with carefully collated background information makes it a unique account of a historically crucial set of event. □

COLOURFUL JINGLES

Black hands may nurse our babies,
Black hands may cook our food,
Black hands may make our beds, and do our washing,
and that's GOOD.

Black hands may do the dishes,
Black hands may keep us clean . . .
But would you shake a black hand? NO!
You don't know where it's been.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
Last buses trundle, laden overly,
As thousands homeward wend their weary way;
But that applies to darkies — not to me.

Stephanie Warren.