

CASEY AND COMPANY

edited by Mthobisi Mutloose; Ravan Press, 1978

Reviewed by Marie Dyer.

This is a collection of stories, sketches and other short pieces (most of them first published in *Drum*) written by the Johannesburg journalist Casey Motsisi over a period of 20 years up to his death in 1977.

They derive from the "shebeen culture" of Johannesburg's black townships, and the earlier sketches offer as a response to the hardships of township life – squalor, poverty, arrests, evictions, pass raids, muggings, robberies – a determined gaiety and frivolity; an ebullient acceptance of all these trials as background facts of a life whose main preoccupation is gathering enough cash or credit for a convivial session at Aunt Peggy's joint. The characters depicted are dauntlessly enterprising and resourceful, using their wits to challenge all of society indiscriminately. There is Mattress who

locks himself in from the outside with a padlock and then squeezes through the window at night. This will give the cops the impression that he had already left when they come a-raiding in the wee-small hours.

There is Kid Newspapers who

pulls out a newspaper and points at it. There's a ring around a little advert for a night watchman. Kid Newspapers tells me that on the same night that the advert appeared in the newspapers he went around to the firm, and he and the boys had the easiest time removing the safe and bolting away with it as there was no watchman.

Kid Sponono assures Casey's money-grabbing landlord that his missing son has been arrested and is working on a farm in Nigel. He collects £15 for the fine; but all the time the son has actually been

doing the dog's meat act somewhere in Houghton with a 'menyana I wouldn't look at twice.

Even Aunt Peggy herself manages not to sell-out in the potato boycott. Although her Joe-Louis-Knock-Out concoction is usually brewed with horse lungs and potato jackets

she tells me she's a true daughter of Africa and wouldn't touch a potato even to throw at a cop batoning her. But seeing she has to satisfy her customer's thirst, she decided to use banana peels instead.

Confronting intolerable social or political situations (or refusing to confront them) by demonstrating a determined undauntedness was possible in Sophiatown in the 50's, but not in Soweto after 1976. Motsisi acknowledges this by a kind of drift into nostalgia and vagueness in a piece written in 1976:

Ah well, things aren't what they used to be. But Aunt Peggy is still there. Lumpy and lofty. Serene. Bearing things with patience until next year when we shall all see what will happen. Will Black Sense take over from Black Power. We want to see things shaping up nicely and going on smoothly . . .

The Sophiatown sketches, then, are real period pieces depicting a vanished time.

In the very few short stories, situations are dealt with realistically and vigorously. Ma Tladi, a shebeen queen addressing the father of an illegitimate child, and her own remonstrating husband, is very different from the "serene and lumpy" Aunt Peggy of the sketches:

"You drunkard of a pig . . . You come here saying 'nip, auntie'. You rubbish. You had better save that five shillings and go and buy your child clothes and napkins. Get out of here and stop saying 'nip, nip, auntie', before I throw boiling water on your face, you drunkard . . . You keep that babelaaas bek shut before I bash it in with this pot . . ."

The single poem in the collection, "The Efficacy of Prayer", is quite mordant:

. . . How the kids used to worship Dan the Drunk!
He was just like one of them grown older too soon.
'I'm going to be just like Dan the Drunk' a little girl
said to her parents . . .
The parents looked at each other and their eyes prayed.
'God Almighty, save our little Sally'.
God heard their prayer.
He saved their Sally.
Prayer. It can work miracles.
Sally grew up to become a nanny.

But it is probably Motsisi's comic writing, his response to his own exhortation "Forward the Light Brigade", by which he will be remembered most affectionately. ¹¹