

BookViews



**SUNSHINE
& SHADOWS**
Author: ABEL PHELPS
Publisher: ECHOING
GREEN PRESS
Review: MICHAEL
SHAFTO

HERE is a book of South African short stories that deserves to be widely read and savoured. It would also not be out of place in school curriculums.

It tells a great deal about this country, specially the bygone times of the Anglo-South African War and several decades immediately following it.

The author, Abel Phelps, lives in Pietermaritzburg with his wife and is in his 90s. He migrated to South Africa from England in 1927, initially to work on farms in the Eastern Karoo, the southern Free State and KwaZulu-Natal – lending to the stories set in the early part of the last century a rich vein of authenticity. The book is divided into two sections. The stories in Part 1 take place in rural settings in the Karoo and Free State against a background of the events of those early times. In Part 2, most of the settings are urban and modern. This is a second edition and is



accompanied by a deserved laudatory foreword to the first edition in 1991 by one of South Africa's leading literary figures and poet, Guy Butler.

What I liked about the collection – there are 19 stories in all – is the lean muscularity of the prose. His style is reminiscent of

Herman Charles Bosman, but is wholly his own. The comparison is made merely as a signpost to the sort of literature one can expect to encounter here. The direct narrative style puts you rapidly at the very heart of the matter – the mark of a true storyteller.

The volume, too, is perfectly paced, starting and ending with two of the best stories – *The Cable Bridge* and the more contemporary *Headwork*.

If I were to pick two favourites, they would be *A Gift of Milk* and *The Yellow Horses* for what they say about the human condition.

It's a slimmish volume, but imaginatively produced by a local company located in Empangeni, and of a quality not often encountered in South African publishing.