

# From Bethulie to Burghersdorp

This Day 2 September  
2004

**Sunshine & Shadows:  
A Collection of South African  
Short Stories**

by Abel Phelps

Echoing Green Press, R123

Reviewed by

CRAIG CANAVAN

**T**HERE is a beautiful elegance, born of simplicity, which flows through the finest examples of the short-story genre and it is an elegance with which writer Abel Phelps is well acquainted: the stories collected in *Sunshine & Shadows*, some no more than a few pages long, are simple in their telling but all the more vivid and vigorous for that simplicity.

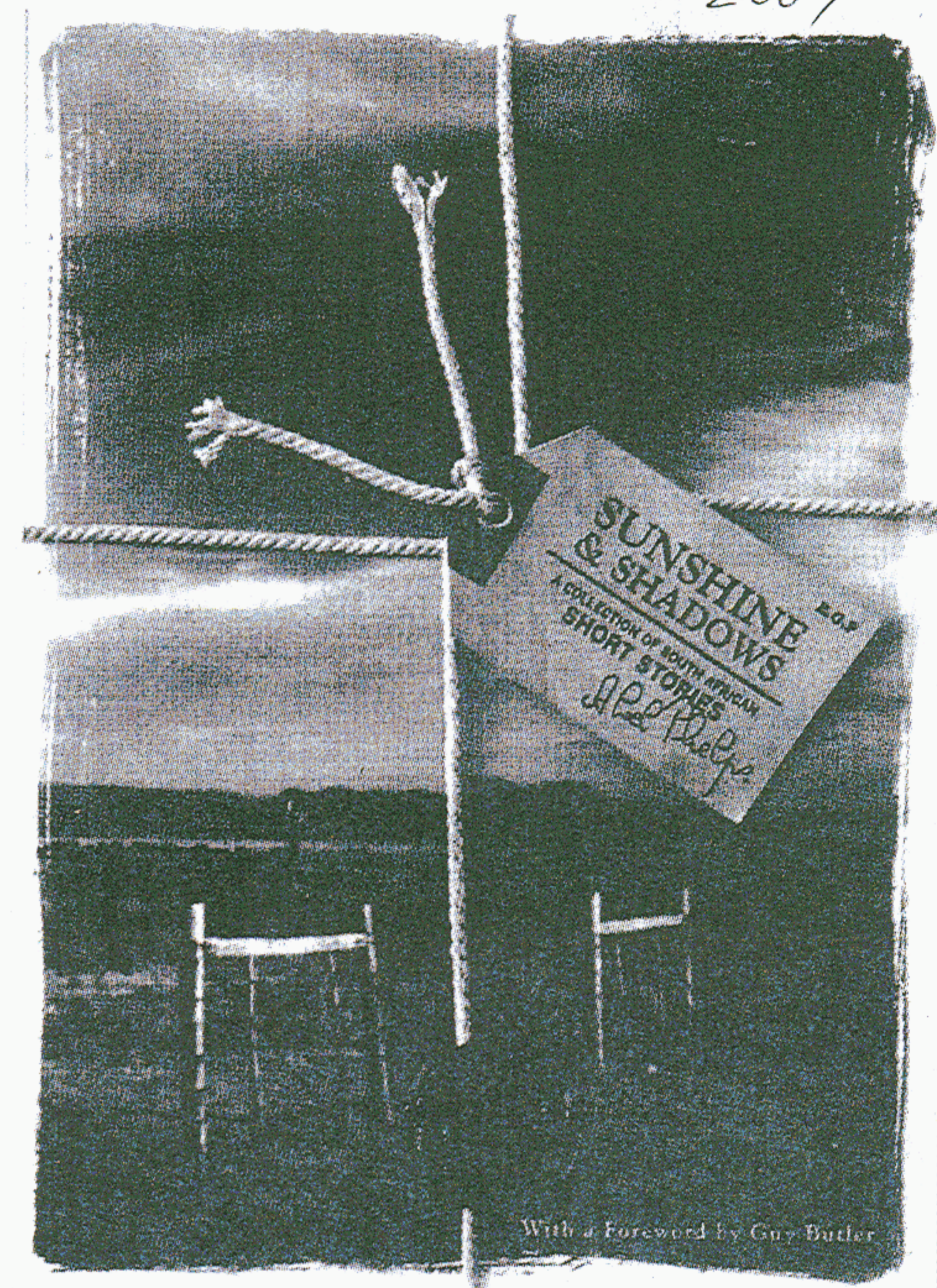
Like the great Raymond Carver, to whom he bears more than a passing resemblance as a writer, Abel Phelps is a master of saying much with very little. His writing is clear, concise and uncomplicated — but brimming over with emotion and meaning.

Born in 1910 and a resident in South Africa since 1927, Phelps spent much of his early years in the country working on farms across the Orange Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the Cape, and it is mostly his experience as an itinerant farm worker that has inspired these stories.

Firmly rooted to the land where they live, a landscape delicately yet sumptuously painted in words by Phelps, the characters of these yarns are a simple and focused lot: rural people firmly in tune with the heartbeat of the land on which they live, who yearn not for fame and riches but for a basic, decent life; a life free of too much hardship and personal pain; a life filled with love and friendship.

These short tales examine that yearning and the sacrifices that go into surmounting the small yet demanding obstacles that life puts in the way. Some of the stories are sad, some end with a glimmer of hope, others fairly shine with joy. All are supreme examples of the art of the short story.

*The Cable Bridge*, a story of love, jealousy and betrayal set during the Anglo-Boer War, is written in two versions, one ending in bitterness and hate; the other in reconciliation and forgiveness.



Though it may seem like overkill to feature the same story twice in one collection, there are enough differences between the two versions to set them apart as separate tales in their own right. And they capture perfectly the sentiment expressed by the title of the collection: these stories are concerned with the sunshine and shadows of life, the happy and the sad, the joyous and the grim.

Sunshine permeates *Matchwood*, my personal favourite among the 19 tales collected here. There are no shadows in this gentle, heart-warming tale of two lonely, shy people discovering each other.

Told over a scant six pages, the clarity of the narrative — there are no hidden agendas, no betrayals, no secrets and nothing much happens except that two people see hope in one another — will have you gasping in admiration at the powerful economy of Phelps's writing.

Possibly the most striking feature

of the stories, however, is the lack of what some might call contemporary relevance. These stories are not concerned with politics or race or the struggle, they are focused entirely on the individual human being, white or black, male or female, young or old. They do not assault one's social conscience, they do not maximise one's guilt, and they don't try to make any sort of point except that pain and love know no boundaries.

Though this collection has been available for a while in a hard-to-find private publication and on the internet, this new public edition, which includes a foreword written by distinguished South African scholar and author Guy Butler in 1991, is a welcome addition to South Africa's powerful short story tradition.

Filled with humour and compassion, tears and laughter, *Sunshine and Shadows* is a masterful collection of short fiction.