

**Barolong Seboni, *Nitty Gritty: The Book of Meanings*. Gaborone: AgaMotseBooks, 2023, 109 pages, ISBN Ebook: 978-99968-955-2-4; ISBN Print book: 978-99968-955-1-7**

*Nitty Gritty-The Book of Meanings* is Barolong Seboni's latest compilation of brief satirical skits, vignettes, rib-ticklers, poems and lists of newly minted words and jingles. The jocular collection features a complete dictionary of *Tshele* ('gossip'). Intellectual teasers, light-minded Commandments, prayers, and laments are in the mix. Seboni's literary credentials are secure. He is an author of more than a dozen book publications. For more than half a century, he has consistently proven to be a productive writer. As a writer, he has remarkable drive, staying power, versatility, and finesse. Seboni is an unassuming doyen of Botswana literature who continues to use his ever-valid poetic licence to edify. He dedicates his humorous pieces to a quintet of brilliant Botswana journalists whom he honours as 'the grandmasters of satire' namely: Rampholo Molefhe, Paul Rantao, Kgosinkwe Moesi, Billy Chiepe and Douglas Tsiako.

Seboni's literary witticism is a timely antidote in these grim days of catastrophic confrontation amidst merciless cost of living. The satirical gems in *Nitty Gritty-The Book of Meanings* have previously appeared in *Mmegi*, *Botswana Guardian* and *The Botswana Gazette* as serial columns. The pieces may have first appeared decades ago but they retain literary potency and currency. The setting and atmosphere of *Nitty Gritty* is an emblematic shebeen located in one of neighbourhoods of Gaborone.

The purpose of this write-up is to show qualities that make *Nitty Gritty* tick. I take care not to get in between the reader and the pleasure of reading the collection on her own. I spare the juicy details. I will only skirt around the subject, just to whet the reader's appetite.

Drawing on his poetic prowess and his storehouse of storytelling techniques, Seboni establishes a symbolic urban watering-hole where a community of regular patrons converge to quench thirst, cool off from the heat of day, ease the strain of life and enjoy the jolly good company of fellow imbibers of distilled beverages. The *Nitty-Gritty* patrons sit around an oblong table and shoot the breeze. Seboni creates a worldly and perceptive narrator who keeps the reader posted about what goes on at the shebeen. The narrator has the right tone for connecting with the readers. He is a knowledgeable and sensible persona with an antenna for what needs to be done, where to do it, how and with whom. Through this astute narrator with a keen ear for the spoken word, readers eavesdrop on the conversation and exchanges.

The characters at *Nitty Gritty* are figures of fun. Snapshots and thumbnail sketches of their banter easily catch fire in the reader's imagination. The tactful narrator gives characters such as Ausi Maggie, Walkie Talkie, Mr Kool, Smooch and Nikita ample latitude to express themselves in the precise circumstances that they find themselves in. The characters do not disappoint in this regard, they think out loud, they act and interact, and air their views without let or hindrance. They are as memorable as they are colourful. They leap off the page and jump at the reader. They are relatable characters who are recognisable among the flesh and blood personalities in our everyday lives.

Seboni's streetwise narrator makes readers see characters arguing, musing, conferring, reflecting, venting, ribbing, gossiping about issues current, social and philosophical. Today's readers who prefer visual imagery will surely connect with vividly presented escapades of *Nitty-Gritty* regulars. The reader will be enraptured by what is said at the *Nitty-Gritty*. The readers get to know the characters intimately.

A key feature of Seboni's writing is the ability to communicate a whole range of feelings, emotions and insights using a few choice words. Seboni's writing is an object lesson in brevity, and concision. His carefully chiselled prose is easy to absorb. It commands attention by speaking volumes succinctly. The choice of words and their order on the page create an emotional experience for the reader and evoke joyous sensation.

The author is a writer with practical mastery of the principles of writing. He understands the power of language and the technique of its use. He knows how to generate the electricity of fresh metaphor. He knows when and how to deploy an apt simile. He invites the reader to a mutual search for the apt word. The reader is even cordially nudged into the game of inventing new words.

His satire is not indignant or choleric. He dispenses measured and sparkling humour authentically delivered in a good-natured fashion. The jocularity is pleasantly moderated. Seboni's wordplay, especially the punning, rhyming, makes his writing evocative and resonant. He uses catching language that is sensitive to and capable of registering the psychodynamics of life in contemporary Botswana. He takes the given word, the received lexicon, the inherited vocabulary of the English language and strips it down, disassembles it and then goes on to revarnish it and render it fit for the depicting the joy and sorrow of living in modern Botswana. The King's language is sprinkled with Setswana expressions, smatterings of Afrikaans and Tsotsitaal.

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