



Campbell's book opens lid on housing corruption



Book Review

JENNIFER CROCKER

ESTHER'S HOUSE BY CAROL CAMPBELL (UMUZI)

CAROL Campbell caused quite a stir with her first novel *My Children Have Faces* and with *Esther's House* she has maintained, if not upped, her writing game.

Set in Oudtshoorn, an area Campbell knows well, it is winter and bitterly cold.

A tragedy occurs when Katjie realises that her illegally connected electricity is malfunctioning. She knows this can mean disaster and so she runs to the house of her landlord and begs him to switch off the mains.

It's a dramatic moment and

Campbell fills in the drama with real understanding. Katjie knows that she needs to switch off the mains but when her grumpy avaricious landlord doesn't answer the door there is a poignant moment where she, an elderly woman, agonises over whether she should risk going into the house and doing it herself.

After all, as a yard dweller she knows what happens if you annoy the landlord, if you don't pay your rent on time and your belongings are thrown out into the street. Katjie knows and so she waits and begs: And her shack burns down, leaving her with a dead daughter and two small children to raise.

For her friend, Esther, this is the final straw, the two have been on the municipal list for many, many years and Esther determines enough is enough. She persuades Katjie to go with her to the municipal offices.

Where the strength of Campbell's writing shines is that she sees the story through the eyes of ordinary good people.

We know Esther and the woman she is through the description of how she dresses in her best dress to go to the municipal offices, which starkly contrasts to the way in which she is pushed from pillar to post by well-dressed smooth officials.

Somehow her demeanour and the shattering of her faith when she is told she and Katjie are not on the list are placed in contrast to expose the shameful corruption and rigging that we all sus-

pect goes on in many housing offices.

Esther seems powerless, but she isn't. She has had enough and so she takes action. Campbell carefully plots her small, but brave rebellion and through it weaves a tale of how a person who has played by the rules may well be forced by circumstances to break them.

Every action has a counteraction and one is constantly reminded through Campbell's narrative that we are talking a very small house of limited charm here, but a jewel to a woman who has raised her family in a shack, unleashes a series of events.

While many of them are dramatic, the author has chosen not to go the shock horror of storytelling, but rather to tell the story through the eyes and in the words

of ordinary people caught up in a maelstrom they have unleashed.

That isn't to say that Campbell doesn't capture the sense of shock that the reader meets when she plunges into writing about the depth of corruption that has locked Esther and Katjie (along with many others) out of the houses they have waited so long for. She does.

And a brutal truth it is. Anyone who reads this would have to be very hard hearted not to have gained insight into why people choose to occupy houses.

But more than that, this is a story about real characters, they are not all perfect, they make mistakes. They do the wrong things at times. They are human and fallible, but they shine in this must-read book.

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