

*Small Moving Parts* by Sally-Ann Murray (Kwela) R225  
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The 1960's have had something of a vogue in South African fiction, perhaps because many people currently of novel-writing age had their childhoods in that fraught decade. It was, of course, the decade of Sharpeville and the death of Verwoerd, a decade of apartheid triumphant and resistance largely quiescent after the Rivonia trials and the incarceration of Mandela and others. It was also a decade of white complacency, uneasiness over communism and the black majority largely allayed by growing prosperity.

*Small Moving Parts* offers a wonderful evocation of that decade in all its naïve insensitivity, observed, as in many novels about the period, through the eyes of a child – in this instance the precocious Halley Murphy. The political sub-text is very much there, but subordinated, as it would have been in the consciousness of a child, to the drudgery and delights of daily life.

Daily life, here, takes place largely in Kenneth Gardens, a complex of “Corporation” housing in Durban’s Umbilo area. Halley and her mother, Nora, and sister, Jen, live in Ixia Court with the “mediocre distinction” of a “functional, straight-roofed entrance hall.” It’s in fact an undistinguished setting, “a popular choice for struggling whites”, and Nora, abandoned by her feckless husband sets out to bring up her two girls to rise above their surroundings. This entails not “playing with kids whose parents are clearly low class” – and Nora has a long list of identifying characteristics to help her daughters spot such: “people who say kaffer, coon, munt, pekkie, or wog... Chippies who smoke in public, appear in curlers outside, shout like fishwives, and swan around like floozies. ... Slags who can’t be bothered to hold their stomachs in.”

For all the comic excess of Nora snobbery, we are given a set of brilliant snapshots of an era and a class, indeed of a whole social history of fashions and products, of beliefs and prejudices, of warped values and wasted lives.

Not that there is anything judgemental in Murray’s depiction of this environment. In Halley she has a wonderful focaliser, who takes in everything without preconception, puzzling to make sense of her little world -- and indeed of the great world out there, for Halley is an ambitious explorer, both of the world and of the language used to describe it. A running concern of the novel is the slippery relation between world and language, as Halley struggles to make sense of the words surrounding her: “You must be double-jointed, dear, the teacher says, as if that explains everything, but it only serves to keep Halley guessing. What does ‘must’ mean? Is the teacher’s remark based on what she has observed, thus constituting a statement of fact, or is it a guarded injunction, even a warning?”

Murray is a prize-winning poet, and knows that language can constitute reality as much as describe it, depending on whether it’s a statement of fact, an injunction or a warning -- or any number of other things, including a weapon: “The English -speaking kids curse all the time about Afrikaners vrot banana koeliesnot, and they know to avoid the dirty Dutchmen, damn rockspiders even if they’ve never seen the Transvaal.” *Small Moving Parts* is among other things a treasury of the vernacular of a particular class and place, recorded with a poet’s ear and a novelist’s eye.

If “Halley knew how life was fearfully and wonderfully made”, then Murray is up to the task of finding language to render it. There are examples on every page, but here, at random, is a description of an earthworm appearing after a downpour: “a fat blind tip, single pollex thumbing through drenched soil. It is a tunnel come alive, nudging the red-brown earth aside like a muscular liquid.”

Incidentally, if you know what a “pollex” is, you are this novel’s ideal reader. You may also try “sastrugi” and “marasmus”, “birl”, “spurtle” and “lanugo”: alert as this novel is to the language of the street, it also contains a dizzying vocabulary of technical and scientific terms which, in Murray’s hands, achieve a kind of poetry of their own.

But if Halley is the recorder of the “fearfully and wonderfully made” world, its heroine is her indomitable mother, “Bladdy Nora Murphy, who walks around with a ruler up her backside and her nose in the air,” as the neighbours describe her. Battling her way up from her orphanage upbringing, winged by an unwise marriage and two pregnancies in quick succession, Nora tirelessly labours to keep herself and her daughters decent and stylish, not to subside into the mire of poverty and defeat surrounding them.

It is Nora who is given the insight from which the novel derives its title: “history is all you get to live in, the hard times and missed places. A big box of small moving parts which is hard enough for anyone to carry, and certainly ought not to be handed out without warning.”

If, here, the small moving parts are mainly an image of the precarious, puzzling nature of existence, in the novel as a whole they come to stand for its multifariousness, for the endlessly fascinating constituents of a world that repays magnificently the attention one bestows upon it. Murray’s novel brings that world to miraculous life.