Recent Reviews of Life Writing Publications

List of Publications Consulted

All publications are from South Africa, unless otherwise indicated.
Prices are quoted in South African Rands.

*Cape Argus*
*Cape Times*
*City Press*
*The Citizen*
*D'Arts*
*De Kat*
*Die Burger*
*Eastern Province Herald*
*East Cape Weekend*
*Fairlady*
*The Herald*
*Journal of Southern African Studies*

*Mail & Guardian*
*The Mercury*
*The Natal Witness*
*Pace*
*Pretoria News*
*Saturday Dispatch*
*Scrutiny2*
*The Star*
*The Sunday Independent*
*Sunday Times*
*Sunday Tribune*

Ackerman, Raymond

*Hearing Grasshoppers Jump: The Story of Raymond Ackerman as told to Denise Pritchard.*

by Raymond Ackerman.
This biography of businessman Raymond Ackerman recounts the growth of his business empire, situating these developments in the context of South African politics. Ackerman is characterised as an astute strategist, brilliant businessman and someone with a big heart.


Alagiah, George

*A Passage to Africa.*

by George Alagiah.
Born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Alagiah grew up in Ghana. A Passage to Africa is an autobiographical account of this BBC journalist’s travels in Africa—in Ghana, Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa. He gives an
eyewitness account of newsworthy events, and his experiences of them. For readers who seek an overview of recent political developments, Alagiah's book offers a stimulating history lesson. Occasionally romanticised and reliant on generalisation, Alagiah nevertheless maintains a critical distance.


*Passage to Africa* 'is a profound, soul-stirring and introspective exploration' of Alagiah's relationship with the continent.


**Buckle, Catherine**

*African Tears: The Zimbabwe Land Invasions.*

by Catherine Buckle.


As the land grab campaign that started in Zimbabwe in 2000 escalated, farmers who were helpless in the face of state-orchestrated terror kept the world informed of developments via e-mail. *African Tears* is the product of Catherine Buckle's e-mail correspondence. It is 'the most chilling, most depressing book I have read in a long while. It begs comparison with what it must have been like to have been a Jew in Germany in the thirties'. However, what strikes one is not so much a race war, but rather 'a campaign of political terror conducted by political thugs whose role models are the soldiers who murdered thousands in Matabeleland in the early eighties, rather than the liberation fighters who fought for a just society.'


Highly topical and very disturbing, this book climbs out from behind the headlines and the politicking to present the reality of the land grabs happening in Zimbabwe. Buckle has given a shocking human face to an issue that is growing more and more urgent.


**Campbell, Roy**

*Bloomsbury and Beyond: The Friends and Enemies of Roy Campbell.*

by Joseph Pearce.


In this new biography, coinciding with the centenary of Campbell's birth, Joseph Pearce examines previously unpublished material. He has produced a 'rich and engaging insight' into Campbell.

Chimeloane, Rrekgetsi
*Whose Laetie are you? My Sowetan Boyhood.*
by Rrekgetsi Chimeloane.
To be asked ‘Whose Laetie are you?’ in the Soweto (South Africa) of the 1970s was a recognition ritual. You told people who your older brothers were and you were immediately known and placed in the township hierarchy. Chimeloane grew up in Soweto in the 1960s and 1970s and this delightful memoir—more personal than political—offers an appealing glimpse into a childhood world of frightening dogs, games, fights, friendships and delights in times of profound turmoil.

Original and powerfully honest, Whose Laetie are you? is an autobiographical journey of a boy growing up in South Africa’s largest township.

Coetzee, J.M.
*Youth.*
by J.M. Coetzee.
In Britain, JM Coetzee’s new book has been read as a novel. Yet it is clearly an autobiography, one that follows on the first volume, Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life. The distinction impacts on reading strategies: as Craig Raine argues, ‘With fiction, the reader constantly asks why? Autobiography apparently answers this question before it can be asked: incidents, details, are included because they happened.’ The reader is going to be interested in Youth because it is the autobiography of a writer whose fiction is already known; to read it as a novel is to be disappointed. Youth’s lack of shapeliness and rather hard, cold prose alone should make its autobiographical status clear, especially if one compares it to Coetzee’s novels. Coetzee’s use of the third person is a distancing manoeuvre, and he is merciless in his portrayal of this miserable, half-deluded John (between the ages of 19 and 24) and his passive, ne’er-do-well father and clinging mother. The book’s conclusion is inconclusive, but the doubts about art that plague John are those that have informed Coetzee’s fiction and criticism ever since.

The narrator, a student at the University of Cape Town, seems to dislike women: his behaviour when a young woman he has impregnated has an abortion is, he observes, ignominious. He writes: ‘He prays she will never tell the story to anyone’. Perhaps
within this beautifully written little sentence lies the utter tragedy and ghastliness of *Youth*. The narrator cannot make contact with people. He fears the loss of face and of his non-existent art. But the joke is on him in the end, because he cannot be an artist because he is too scared of failure.

Can this be everything this slim novel is about? If it is about something more profound I could not find it. *Youth* is ‘one of the most beautifully written books about nothing that I have had the privilege to read.’ It is a depressing book ‘about god-forsaken people who would all have benefited the reading public greatly if they had not been inflicted on them.’


Colenso, Harriette

*The View Across the River: Harriette Colenso and the Zulu Struggle Against Imperialism.*
by Jeff Guy.
This is ‘a fluently written recapitulation of the public life of a remarkable person and, simultaneously, a carefully wrought study of key events in a formative period for whole societies. A world springs alive in Jeff Guy’s readily accessible, evocatively gripping, always scholarly writing on an outstanding woman’ whose unswerving opposition to colonial injustice led to her lasting commitment to the Zulu struggle. The narrator distances himself from lapses into novelist-like speculation about emotions and thoughts; he abjures elevating the characters to saint-like forbearance; and he rejects the many trivialising stereotypes associated with writing about European women in colonial African history.


Coulter, Jean

*Remembering ... The Life, the People and the Places.*
by Coulter, Jean
(Further information not available at time of going to press.) R100.00.
This book is packed with the author’s memories of growing up in the Transkei and Pondoland, in South Africa. It is rich in history, illustration and anecdote.


Denis, Philippe

*The Casspir and the Cross: Voices of Black Clergy in the Natal Midlands.*
by Philippe Denis, Thulani Mlotshwa and George Mukuka.
This short book is the result of a research project located at the School of Theology at the University of Natal in South Africa. It aims to contribute to the writing of history from below by recovering the ‘silenced memories’ of 34 members of the black clergy who lived in the Natal midlands during the apartheid years 1948-1994. The oral interviews are arranged thematically: chapter one looks at discrimination in daily life; chapter two records discrimination within the church and chapter three at the formation of black caucuses within mainstream churches in response to apartheid. The last two chapters focus on protest and political violence in the broader society.

While the book provides fascinating and rich oral testimonies, the fact that the authors provide no analysis, argument or interpretation is an abdication of the responsibility to challenge hegemonic accounts.


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de Lille, Patricia

*Patricia de Lille*

by Charlene Smith.


Journalist Charlene Smith’s biography of the South African Pan Africanist Congress parliamentarian Patricia de Lille holds her up as an heroic figure. Smith etches out a full portrait of a woman in all her multiple facets—from the teenager forced to part with her daughter, to the grief-stricken sibling vowing to bring her sister’s murderer’s and rapists to justice, to the middle-aged woman struggling against cancer and exposing the South African State’s arms scandal. Although ‘this well-written biography tends to lose focus somewhat’, it ‘succeeds in revealing how much [South Africa] needs people like de Lille’.


This biography is essentially about how this parliamentarian, a member of a small opposition party, has managed to ‘hog the headlines’ in South Africa. It ‘is a good read that not only provides an insight into Patricia de Lille as a public and political persona but also into how political parties operate within the parliamentary context’ in post-apartheid South Africa.


Smith’s account brings us closer to the defiant and fearless woman whose role in the exposure of corruption in the South African Government’s arms deal elicited death threats, who has challenged the President, Thabo Mbeki, and his government’s AIDS
policy, as well as their responses to the Zimbabwean elections.

Along with Helen Suzman, de Lille has changed the way South Africans perceive and play politics and the way in which women see themselves. What shines through in this (occasionally sloppily-edited) biography, in which the subject gave full cooperation to the author, is that this remarkable woman ‘is the ultimate patriot’.


**De Wet, Christiaan**


by Fransjoohan Pretorius.


That a few poorly educated men, largely farmers, who valued their independence highly, could produce a military force that tied the world’s greatest empire in knots for three years the during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) still strikes us as worthy of study. Christiaan de Wet, the subject of this biography, was a farmer and a leader of a commando (the Boer term for militia); he illustrates many of the characteristics that made that long defiance of Britain possible.

This is a soundly written account and suffers only from the lack of good, detailed maps.


**Dolny, Helena**

*Banking on Change.*

by Helena Dolny.


‘Helena Dolny, Joe Slovo’s widow and former ‘disgraced’ managing director of the [South African] Land Bank, soundly exposes the dirty tricks behind its shafting of her in this intriguing read about the transformation of a white male-dominated, apartheid structure to its present success story. A brave, compelling and important book.’


**Evans, Gavin**

*Dancing Shoes is Dead: A Tale of Fighting Men in South Africa.*

by Gavin Evans.

There is an unfiltered honesty about Evans’s descriptions of his childhood, and on this foundation he builds an account of his later experiences. These are divided between accounts of his growing political involvement in the underground movement of the ANC and his work as a boxing journalist.

What makes the book is Evans’s effortless style. Laced with a dry, cynical belief in the fallibility of human nature, his writing is simple and direct. It is a book that anyone who abhorred apartheid should read.


This is a real-life, riveting string of stories recollected by Evans about his youth—inside the amateur boxing ring and as a young member of the ANC underground in the Eastern Cape. This ‘vivid and incisive portrayal’ of twin passions is set against the backdrop of South Africa under apartheid. It is a must-read for boxing fans and historically-minded readers alike.


‘Compellingly written, it is riveting from cover to cover. ... [It] is unmissable—one of the finest reads to emerge from South Africa in recent decades.’


‘Dancing Shoes is Dead’ boasts some of the most gripping and intelligent writing on the sport [of boxing] I’ve read, combining knowledge of the ring ... with a complex political and personal hinterland.’ ‘Among other things, this book is a major addition to the literature of activist burn-out .... In his ambivalence towards both the heroic years of struggle [against apartheid] and the compromised realities of post-apartheid South Africa, Evans is not alone among veterans of the movement.’


The title and cover are misleading: ‘the book is an autobiographical work that uses boxing’ (Jacob ‘Dancing Shoes’ Morake was a great South African boxer of the 1980s and early 1990s) ‘and politics as beasts of burden bearing the yoke of pulling the cart (book) along .... For Evans alone, an autobiography would be as difficult to sell as fridges in Alaska. He is not a great name.’ Nevertheless, boxing and politics are ‘integral to his life’ and this is ‘a great book’.


**Fordyce, Bruce**

*Bruce Fordyce: Comrades King.*

by John Cameron-Dow.
John Cameron-Dow’s account captures in a very readable manner the varied depth of Bruce Fordyce, one of South Africa’s all-time sporting greats, the eight times winner of the Comrades Marathon.

Fuller, Alexandra
Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight.
by Alexandra Fuller.
Alexandra Fuller’s story of growing up as the youngest member of a dysfunctional family in the sweltering madness of Rhodesia’s civil war, is ‘simply spellbinding’. Fuller came to Africa when she was two, and by the time she was five she could strip and clean all the guns in the house, load a rifle and shoot to kill; but it’s really her relationship with her family that lifts the book from the danger of being just another African tale of woe.

Fuller recounts her childhood in Zimbabwe. ‘What sets this book apart from other African memoirs of childhood is not only its refreshingly frank exposé of white consciousness then, but also its writing that is concise, swift, stylish and deeply poetic.’

Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight has been much praised in the major English newspapers and acclaimed in the New York Times in part because of the timing of its appearance (Zimbabwe is in the global spotlight), in part because—unlike other recent books on Zimbabwe which tend towards liberal apologia—Fuller’s book is being hailed as a refreshingly ‘honest’ account of growing up during the Rhodesian civil war.

    It is ‘charming, harrowing, compassionate and funny’; it refuses to reduce the colonial world to anything less than the sum of its parts. ‘Overall, it is a beautiful little book.’

This astoundingly honest ‘memoir of her childhood in war-torn Southern Rhodesia manages to be both frank and humorous .... Do not expect sentimentality, even though she conveys her passion for the feel, smell and sounds of Africa with a captivating vividness. Fuller is frank about the racism that characterised her youth,
and the land hunger that fuelled the war in Rhodesia.’ Her record of racist epithets is shocking, ‘but Fuller carries it off, just as she manages to lay open what happened to her family without detracting from their dignity.’


Fuller makes no attempt to white-wash the colonial attitude she was brought up with. Refreshingly, there are no fake liberal analyses or self-conscious apologies for the political views of her family, although there is certainly a sense of hindsight acknowledgement of the part whites played in the whole mess. Over-riding the danger and tragedy is the family’s unrelenting passion for the continent which brings with it so many hardships.

*Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* is an immensely readable book.


From its arresting title to the very last word, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* is ‘utterly spellbinding’. Fuller’s account of her family’s loyalty to and ferocious love of a harsh and testing continent is ‘searingly vivid and evocative’.


Haggard, Henry Rider  
*Diary of an African Journey.*  
by Henry Rider Haggard.  
Scottsville, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 2000, 345 pp. R149,00  
*Diary of an African Journey* was written in 1914, by the author of *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She*. Rider Haggard’s original encounter with South Africa was as a young civil servant in the early 1880s. The diary recounts his return to Africa in 1914, as a member of the Dominions Royal Commission.


Haynes, Tim  
*The House at the Edge of the World.*  
by Tim Haynes.  
This book is the true account of South African Tim Haynes, his wife Clare and their two small children, who escape to a ramshackle country house in the west of Ireland. Tim recounts hilarious anecdotes of rural life among the locals. The book is a must for anyone who harbours the romantic dream that if one can just get far enough away from it all, a life of bliss is to be discovered.

Hunter, Glyn, Larry Farren and Althea Farren. 
*Voices of Zimbabwe.*
by Glyn Hunter, Larry Farren and Althea Farren. 
*Voices of Zimbabwe* is a moving and inspirational book presenting the views and experiences of people from different backgrounds, ethnic groups and economic sectors, including those with opposing views. Most stories and poems begin with a pertinent quotation and many are enhanced with illustrations. Original paintings and photographs portray the immense beauty of a country that deserves to be protected. 

Isaacson, Rupert
*The Healing Land: A Kalahari Journey.*
by Rupert Isaacson.
Rupert Isaacson grew up in an exile home in London, constantly reminded by his South African mother and Rhodesian father that Africa ‘was where he was from’. Through songs, stories, objects and images his parents ensured that the Isaacson children felt the vast southern sub-continent as a tantalising contrast with ‘the overwhelming ordinariness’ of their London life. The first of a series of journeys to find his roots begins in 1985. Increasingly, he is drawn to the Kalahari and the struggles of the Khoi-San people. ‘Notwithstanding the author’s evident empathy for his subjects, I found the juxtaposition of the social tragedy represented by ‘first people’ politics with Isaacson’s personal story of self-fulfilment both morally and aesthetically disconcerting .... Isaacson’s text ends on a note of elegiac hope: if the old ways can be recaptured and as ‘the little people of the Kalahari dance’, so ‘shall the little people round the world dance too’. Maybe not.’ 

Rupert Isaacson’s account of several trips to the Kalahari and the people he met along the way is worth reading for things like his description of a healing trance dance held among the Nharo Bushmen of Botswana. But the book is flawed by its lack of research. The author’s sources are generally the people he meets along the way and he readily accepts their perceptions and prejudices. Some anthropological research would have enabled him to better understand the rituals that puzzle him.


This book ‘rates remarkably well’ amongst competitors which deal with the Kalahari. The reviewer, herself an enthusiast who is obsessed with that part of the
world, 'scanned this book for inconsistencies and skewed opinion. Apart from the usual smattering of errors in the spelling of names and the odd word' she was 'pleasantly surprised at how careful Isaacson was to give a balanced view of the circumstances of contemporary Bushmen, while still allowing his own romanticism to shine through.'


Kaplan, Jonathan

*The Dressing Station—A Surgeon’s Odyssey.*

by Jonathan Kaplan.


Jonathan Kaplan is a rare mix of science and art: a surgeon who has travelled the world and treated victims of violence and disease, and a writer who is able to translate the intensity of his experiences into fascinating stories. *The Dressing Station* is an autobiographical chronicle of a South African doctor’s passage from Kurdistan to Burma to Eritrea, through war zones, poverty-stricken rural hospitals, laboratory work in America and the intriguing politics of life as a ship’s doctor. The author says that he is dogged by a sense of guilt: 'You feel sometimes that everything you are doing is making no difference at all, but you keep doing it because you have no other option .... Part of writing this book has to do with bearing witness and hoping that doing so will somehow cause a change.'


*The Dressing Station* is fascinating yet disturbing reading. Fascinating because Kaplan has a real gift for describing medical detail in a clear and comprehensible way and disturbing because it ruffles that complacent ignorance in which we continue our lives while there is so much blood-letting and conflict on the planet. And as to why anyone would go off to where it’s all happening if they didn’t have to—well, the answer is not really provided in this book. Kaplan is as reticent about his own personal life as he is discreet about the privacy of his patients. But his take on aid organisations and interventionists such as Médecins sans Frontièrnes is lucid and disillusioning.


In *The Dressing Station*, the reader is taken down an unforgettable route through the mind of one South African doctor who, against all the odds, battled day in and day out to save the mangled bodies of his patients. It is a powerful medical odyssey with gripping anecdotes that make the reader recoil in horror then pause for thought.

Khoisan, Zenzile  
*Jakaranda Time.*  
by Zenzile Khoisan.  
*Jakaranda Time* is the life story of one of the investigators for South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This book is a ‘little gem’, even though it is often badly written.  

Luyt, Luis  
*Louis Luyt: Unauthorised.*  
by Max du Preez.  
It would be no exaggeration to say that Louis Luyt is a nasty piece of work whose arrogance, ambition and viciousness have made him one of the least-liked public figures in South Africa. Investigative journalist Max du Preez tries to probe beyond the reticence of even his bitterest enemies, all of whom had seen him destroy too many careers, too many lives, in the past two decades. The intrigues, financial wranglings, nepotism and his greatest miscalculation, dragging former president Nelson Mandela into court to justify a probe into rugby’s affairs, all are chronicled diligently but without much more insight than has already appeared in the press.  

*Louis Luyt Unauthorised* is an excellent piece of work, well researched and crisply presented by a top South African journalist who is himself no stranger to controversy. It is a most readable and fascinating insight into the life of a man who has been one of South Africa’s great headline grabbers of the past 30 years.  

Mathabane, Miriam  
*Miriam’s Song: A Memoir.*  
by Mark Mathabane.  
South African, Mark Mathabane, went to the US on a tennis scholarship. *Miriam’s Song* is the story of his family who stayed behind. Its great appeal is that it takes the reader into the life of a girl wrestling with daily concerns of peer pressure, ambition, boys, parental control and disappointment. In the background, of course, is the constant menace of the police, and Miriam inevitably gets sucked into the violent protests that typified the last years of apartheid. Miriam’s story contains no
revelations, no burning passions and little political commentary. These are its great strengths, as the lived experience of South Africans is always subtler and more complex and in many ways more ordinary than is possible to see in stories of brutality and murder.


This book is not only remarkable because of its sadness but because of the child’s resilience. Poverty, worsened by her father’s drinking and gambling, did not dampen her spirits but did lead to her mother’s mental illness. This book should inspire many deprived black children.


**McNeice, Angus, Maisie and Travers**

*The Lion Children.*

by Angus, Maisie and Travers McNeice.


From a comfortable rural life in England the McNeice clan moved to Maun in the Okavango Delta in Africa: *The Lion Children* is the children’s story of their experiences. It is a unique book, at once a coffee-table treat and a heart-warming read. Through the exquisitely illustrated pages, Maisie, Angus and Travers convey articulately, and with the absolute honesty of youth, their positive reaction to being in Africa. A refreshing, informative and truly addictive book that brings to light a number of important conservation issues that affect southern Africa as a whole.


**Meer, Fatima**

*Prison Diary—One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976.*

by Fatima Meer.


*Prison Diary* deals with the lives of a group of women who were detained under the Terrorism Act during the apartheid period in South Africa. Among those detained with Fatima Meer was Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who wrote the foreword to the book.


This is a ‘compelling personal account’ of Meer’s jail term.

Mkhabela, Sibongile
*Open Earth & Black Roses.*
by Sibongile Mkhabela.
This autobiography by ‘one of the foremost campaigners in the liberation struggle’ in South Africa was released in 2001, twenty-five years after the student uprisings of 1976. The author tells of her harrowing experience at the hands of brutal policemen at the time of the Soweto uprisings. The book is a ‘must have’ because of the historical events it relates and its easy style.


‘After an overdose of the glorification of June 1976’, the date on which thousands of Soweto students confronted the South African apartheid police, ‘from opportunistic writers who have never set foot in Soweto, Sibongile Mkhabela’s account of what really went on behind the scenes before the anger of students spilled into the smoke-laden and dusty streets of Soweto, is a powerful and gripping recollection of events of that day.’ The story ‘is told with lucid simplicity and feeling which makes for compelling reading.’


Mugabe, Robert
*Robert Mugabe: Power, Plunder and Tyranny in Zimbabwe.*
by Martin Meredith.
Meredith, a former journalist and acknowledged author with respectable knowledge of Southern African affairs, paints a gloomy picture of a Zimbabwe under siege by a small bunch of Zanu-PF bigots led by a tyrant. In several instances, however, Meredith intimates, however unwittingly, that Zimbabwe and Mr Mugabe might not have been solely responsible from steering the once economically thriving country into the abyss.


Apart from giving a profile of a violent despot, the book also details the extent to which Mugabe and his circle of cronies have looted the country. The treatment of Mugabe is somewhat superficial, however, and many readers will be left seeking explanations rather than mere descriptions of Mugabe’s excesses.


Meredith vilifies, ridicules and demonises Mugabe in this one-sided biography.
Meredith’s short book concerns itself mainly with Mugabe’s career subsequent to his election as prime minister of independent Zimbabwe; the most heroic phase of his political career—the period spent in Mozambique imposing his will on the various guerilla factions—is still shrouded in mystery. Mugabe and his ‘intellectual apologists project Zimbabwe’s political future as guided by the precepts of Marxism-Leninism’; Meredith does not explore what they mean by ‘Marxism’. Nor does he explore fully the ‘genuinely impressive achievements in the provision of public housing, access to health care, and the stimulation of peasant farming through land and agricultural pricing reform’. Such accomplishments were, however, ‘increasingly overshadowed by the rapacious behaviour’ of the governing class. ‘In this potboiler… Meredith has hardly even bothered to address the obstacles that confront any attempt to understand Mugabe’. His approach is ‘slipshod’, the text littered with ‘factual errors’.


In his nearly 250-page portrait, the Zimbabwean president emerges as an awful, but also as a tragic figure: a greedy despot, but also hugely intellectual, a man who suffered much, but who, with sickening irony, has inflicted much suffering himself. ‘Determined to remain in power,’ Meredith writes, ‘Mugabe has used all the resources of government to attack opponents, sanctioning murder, torture and lawlessness.’ Among Meredith’s striking observations is his claim that ‘democracy is being assaulted in the most vicious way possible because it is actually quite strong …. [It’s] because of the strength of the opposition, and the demand of the people to be heard, that [Mugabe] is having to use vicious methods to suppress it. He needs to use police, the militias, the Zanu-PF youth wing.’


Meredith shows that from the beginning, Mugabe has believed in the power of the gun and has not hesitated to use it. Most of this book is devoted to showing how Mugabe and his ruling elite have systematically looted their own country, destroying its once flourishing economy, using whatever means came to hand to stay in power. Yet Mugabe has never entirely abandoned the pretence of democracy (along with the use of undemocratic methods to win the vote); Meredith doesn’t really examine why this should be. He hints in places at the pressures placed on Mugabe by the World Bank and the IMF, but does not really delve into the nature of that relationship, or describe exactly what those funding bodies expected of the Mugabe government in exchange for their moneys.
The book as a whole, it must be said, is relatively superficial, though it does give a reasonable overview of Mugabe's years in power. And what a sorry story it is. The land resettlement issue is exposed as blatantly political and corrupt, with land being appropriated not only from whites but also from black opponents like Ndabaningi Sithole and about 20 000 members of his tribal group; usually appropriated land is given not to the poor, but to members of the ruling elite. It is clear that the notion of an African renaissance is meaningless unless a stand is taken against despots like Mugabe.


**Paton, Alan and Neville Nuttall**

*A Literary Friendship.*

by Jolyon Nuttall.


This slim, well-researched volume furnishes a fascinating insight into the early, mainly literary friendship between Neville Nuttall, the author's father, and Alan Paton. Paton and Nuttall first met at Natal University College, Pietermaritzburg, in 1921. Most of the first section of the book consists of edited quotes from Nuttall senior's diaries. In the second part, Jolyon Nuttall's writing skills come into their own, as does his fine editing of letters between the two men.


**Paul, Matthew**

*Parabat.*

by Mathew Paul (ed.).


These 'personal accounts of paratroopers in combat situations in South Africa's history' cover five military encounters, from 1955 to the South African incursion into Lesotho in 1999. The accounts are not ideologically neutral since the narrators fought against the southern African liberation movements, and the book could be misused to support political causes. However, this is an intensely human, valuable book.


**Pires, Adelino Serra**

*The Winds of Havoc. Adelino Serra Pires, as told to Fiona Claire Capstick.*

by Adelino Serra Pires.


Adelino Serra Pires was born in Portugal and came out to Mozambique as a child of
eight. *The Winds of Havoc* is the story of a man who became one of the most renowned professional hunters, as told by Capstick, who painstakingly constructed the memoir through tape-recorded interviews between her late husband and Pires.

The memoirs 'make for absolutely fascinating reading, as we are led into a world of sun-swept savannahs and endless beaches'. This idyllic existence came to an end in 1975 when Portugal withdrew from Mozambique. There are tales of violence and destruction, capture and torture. Pires' life, over six decades, in nine African countries, is one of excitement, turbulence and also tragedy.


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**Plaatje, Sol T.**

*The Mafeking Diary of Sol T. Plaatje.*


This new edition of what is 'perhaps the only surviving diary of any war-time black South African', released to commemorate the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) has a revised title, undoes the 'improvements' to Plaatje's prose by a previous copy editor, has new useful footnotes, an expanded map section, and a Preface by Comaroff which examines key theoretical issues. Here Comaroff presents the Diary as a modernist work and Plaatje as a writer who 'anticipated the current concern, in cultural studies, with hybridity'. Also in this third edition are updated dictionary references and amended Endnotes. A century later, it is Plaatje's Diary, rather than Baden-Powell's auto-hagiography that provides a necessary reflection, sometimes ironic, even sardonic, on what was ultimately a war between two colonial powers, British and Boer. Plaatje's observations and interpretations of British and Boer policy are both rare and meaningful.


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**Robinson, Sir Joseph Benjamin**

*Buccaneer.*

by Jeremy Lawrence.


Lawrence recounts the life of the controversial Joseph Robinson, son of 1820 Settlers. Robinson became a formidable figure in the early diamond-hunting days, a member of the Cape legislature and a newspaper proprietor. Lawrence has done a 'thorough and most entertaining job. You won't end up liking Sir J.B., but you're sure to enjoy the book.'

Lawrence has made use of the tangled Robinson papers to produce the first warts-and-all biography of a man who was ‘[alone] among the great pioneers of [South Africa’s] gold and diamond fields .... In the days when ‘the race question’ meant relations between English and Afrikaner, Robinson... was well aware of the harm brought by the dissension between these two groups .... His reward was to be vilified as a ‘pro-Boer’.’


Schechter, Ruth

*The Cape Town Intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her Circle.*

by Baruch Hirson.

The daughter of a rabbinical and Talmudic scholar, Schechter was raised in Cambridge and New York. In 1907, she emigrated to South Africa at the age of nineteen, following her marriage to her first husband. Dubbed a ‘celebrity hunter’, Schechter befriended many contemporary luminaries, including Ghandi and Olive Schreiner. Hirson has ‘resuscitated from oblivion an intense and passionate woman who was certainly influential in the prevailing intellectual debates’; the book, however, ‘cannot live up to Ruth’s own demands for biography: that ‘the historian rescues for us the dead’”.


Sharpe, Chrystal

*If the Cat Fits: Stories of a Vet’s Wife.*

by Chrystal Sharpe.


This semi-autobiographical tale details South African Sharpe’s years as a vet’s wife in the early 1980s. The author’s ‘laid-back, humour-filled and chatty style ... makes for thoroughly enjoyable reading .... Sharpe’s stories—like the animals who have moved in and out of her life—will constantly remind you of not only how precious animals can be in our lives—but how they can impart wisdom and inspiration ...’.


Sher, Antony

*Beside Myself.*

by (Sir) Antony Sher

South African-born actor, Antony Sher has written an autobiography which is ‘extremely readable and entertaining’.


**Slaughter, Carolyn**

*Before the Knife: Memories of an African Childhood.*

by Carolyn Slaughter.


‘Harrowing is too weak a word to describe this autobiographical memoir.’ Carolyn Slaughter should have had an idyllic childhood: born in India in 1947, and moving to Africa after Indian independence. However, this ‘beautifully written, lyrical’ book records horror and sadness. It is ‘an acute and brilliantly observed portrait of British colonialism in its dying days’, ‘a classic of African writing … that will rank with Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*’.


‘Slaughter has enveloped a withering portrait of her appalling parents in a lyrical eulogy to the African landscape’. The narrative skirts around the edges of suppressed memory, and loses itself in descriptive prose, leaving the reader feeling strangely disoriented. Is this a book about Africa, or is it about child abuse? Indeed, there are many unanswered questions.


**Smith, Charlene**

*Proud of Me: Speaking out against Sexual Violence and HIV.*

by Charlene Smith


Despite its desperately serious subject matter, this is an immensely readable book. It begins with an account of South African journalist Smith’s own rape story, and then turns to other people’s stories. Smith has interviewed many people: police, doctors, prosecutors and rape survivors from all walks of life. Throughout she raises questions and picks up on unexpected, but important, issues. The purpose is to call for action against the AIDS pandemic in Africa.


**Smith, Ian**

*Bitter Harvest: The Great Betrayal.*

by Ian Smith

Recent Reviews of Life Writing Publications

This story of Rhodesia’s recent past ‘is a tale of ... cynical betrayal’ by Great Britain. A novel which covered, as Smith does, ‘the treachery and sheer, blatant chicanery that Rhodesia was forced to tolerate’ from Britain would be criticised as ‘being so far over the top as to be ludicrous’. But, as far as was possible, I checked on the accuracy of the author’s memories and conclude that ‘it appears that Mr Smith is telling the whole truth’. Although the style is ‘somewhat cumbersome and pompous’, the book is a must-read for those who wish to have the calamity that is Zimbabwe today put into perspective.


Former Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith writes his version of what took place before Zimbabwe won its independence. The book is ‘a compendium of excuses and justifications of what occurred when Smith declared UDI so that the whites of the country could continue enjoying their privileges without a thought of granting equal rights to the black citizens .... The book is the full story of how the country developed .... It will be read avidly by Smith’s admirers—of which this reviewer is not one.’


Stevenson-Hamilton, James


by Jane Carruthers.


Jane Carruthers’ biography of Stevenson-Hamilton, a man who pioneered environmental conservation in South Africa and became the world’s leading authority on game management, is an important contribution to the genre of environmental history. Although it is bland in patches, Carruthers succeeds in presenting a rounded portrait of an extraordinary individual in an attractive and accessible study.


Strydom, Monique and Callie

*Shooting the Moon: A Hostage Story. As told to Marianne Thamm.*

by Monique and Callie Strydom.


The four-month ordeal of these two South Africans began in April 2000. They were abducted, along with a group of other internationals, from the island of Sipadan, off the northeastern coast of Borneo. Shooting the Moon is an account of their harrowing ordeal which is, unfortunately, marred by Thamm’s ‘over-dramatised’
and 'adjective-heavy' prose. Thamm's 'thriller-style ... robs a heart-wrenching human drama of its most crucial ingredient—intimacy'.


The story of their ordeal as hostages of Islamic militants in Malaysia is recounted in more-or-less chronological order, in both third- and first-person (in the form of diary entries). Interspersed are clips from news reports, facts about their lives and marriage before the drama, accounts of what was happening back home, letters to the couple from various political figures and background information on political hostilities in the region. Although it needs 'some serious editing', the book 'makes for unputdownable reading'.


This story of the abduction and captivity of South Africans Monique and Callie Strydom by Indonesian separatists in 2000 is told by Marianne Thamm. Thamm includes sufficient background to let us understand the motives (if not agree with their methods) of the Abu Sayyaf rebels, and it becomes clear that 'the Philippines continues to be a dubiously effective state, with endemic corruption'.


Suttnner, Raymond
Inside Apartheid's Prison: Notes and Letters of Struggle.
by Raymond Suttnner
This book is an important addition to the record of atrocities committed in the name of apartheid. Arrested in 1975 for producing a pamphlet to publicise the African National Congress, Suttnner gives graphic details of his interrogation and his torture. The letters included in the book provide a sense of intimacy to the story and reveal his precarious emotional state. The reflective nature of Suttnner's story gives it a dynamic quality, but we come away depressed at the waste of so many years.


Taylor, Stephen
Livingstone's Tribe: A Journey from Zanzibar to the Cape.
by Stephen Taylor.
Taylor's 'illuminating travelogue' recounts his travels in Africa, from the island of Zanzibar to the Cape in South Africa, in search of what he calls 'Livingstone's Tribes'—those white people who stayed on after independence in the various
African states. Taylor encounters fascinating characters. The book is ‘an engaging study of societies dealing with a colonial legacy’, its ‘attention to detail and lucid descriptiveness makes good reading’.


Trovato, Ben

*The Ben Trovato Files.*

by ‘Ben Trovato’.
‘This is a wickedly funny book by a mysterious author going by the pseudonym of Ben Trovato.

It consists of letters, many of them outrageous, written to all sorts of people: government officials, President Mbeki [of South Africa], the British Prime Minister, Mick Jagger, the police, various organisations, Nasa, Bill Gates and many others ....
The publisher assures us that all letters and replies are quite genuine.


This collection of letters ‘is blistering satire at its best. The man is a lunatic.’


Tucker, Linda

*Children of the Sun God.*

by Linda Tucker
In 1994, Linda Tucker and a group of friends were in an open-topped truck when they were surrounded by a pride of roaring lions. They were rescued by a sangoma (a traditional African healer). This experience changed the author’s life and she decided to find out more about the creatures and the shamanic woman who saved her life. Tucker’s book is ‘compelling reading’ for in it she ‘skillfully intertwines her shamanic knowledge with scientific ... knowledge garnered from her study of this extraordinary breed of lions.’


Van der Post, Laurens

*Storyteller: The Many Lives of Laurens van der Post.*

by J.D.F. Jones.
Laurens van der Post’s reputation was made by his writings about Africa and his prison camp recollections, both autobiographical and fictional, distinctive within
their genre for their forgiving quality and their attribution of complex personalities to his Japanese captors in Java. His experiences were demonstrably brave, impressively compassionate and politically visionary. All there is to admire in van der Post’s real achievements is generously acknowledged in JDF Jones’s meticulously researched and carefully written biography, commissioned by the van der Post family. And yet van der Post emerges from this exercise as an arresting unpleasant man partly because van der Post’s life stories were often distorted. He defended this by arguing that fiction itself could be a form of truth. The difficulty with this is that his stories were motivated merely by narcissism and snobbery and, in fact, the real version of events might often have been more interesting. Jones’s biography is surprisingly dispassionate. He began his work as an admirer, but he arrived at an understanding of a powerful writer, but a flawed man.


Jones says that van der Post was a ‘master fabricator’ who created multiple versions of his stories—multiple lives, multiple versions of himself—the maintenance of which must have required a skill bordering on genius. Van der Post’s life-long self-promotion was, Jones points out, ‘premeditated, deliberate, even ruthless, never missing a trick’. This 448-page hardback is an absorbing interpretation of the life of a brilliant, but fundamentally flawed, human being.


‘It may be an established custom for the reputations of prominent figures to take a dive after their deaths, only to be re-appraised a few decades later, but seldom has anyone been so thoroughly trashed in a biography as Laurens van der Post in this one.’ The detailing of his exploits as ‘a massive bullshit artist’ makes for an absorbing and entertaining read, ‘but once you’ve got the general idea you almost start feeling sorry for the underdog…. Although Jones concludes with an observation of how much those who knew him loved van der Post, he does not quite explain why.

I suspect that in the end Jones, so busy with the detail of deception, fails to really understand Van der Post and his version of reality. He was a shaman, a trader in myths, a man who bent both legend and reality to his own ends. Where his end was to give meaning and inspiration to a world increasingly searching for it, he succeeded spectacularly …. Of course, if you pick at a magician’s tricks you can reveal the fraud, but why?’

Wylie, Dan

*Dead Leaves: Two Years in the Rhodesian War.*
by Dan Wylie.

This 'lightly fictionalised memoir' is the result of the author's 'long, desperately hard look at his two teenaged years of soldiery in the Rhodesian army from 1978 to 1979'. It is a poet's response—a personal and public truth commission. 'It is rich with literary reference, over-laden perhaps with poetry and prose, when it is the graphic, pacy story telling that gives the reader a lasting impact of one war in southern Africa.'


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