

# Recently Reviewed South African Life Writing Publications V

Reviews Editor: Judith Lütge Coullie

## List of Publications Consulted

All publications are from South Africa, unless otherwise indicated with \*\*. Most prices are quoted in South African Rands.

Reviews which were originally published in Afrikaans are marked with \* and have been translated into English by Judith Lütge Coullie.

** <i>African Book Publishing Record</i>	<i>Pretoria News</i>
<i>African Review of Books</i>	<i>Rapport: Perspektief.</i>
<i>Cape Argus</i>	<i>Saturday Dispatch.</i>
<i>Cape Argus, Tonight</i>	<i>Sowetan</i>
<i>Cape Times</i>	<i>The Herald, TGIF.</i>
<i>Cape Times, Tonight</i>	<i>The Star</i>
<i>Cape Times, Review</i>	<i>The Star, Tonight.</i>
<i>Femina</i>	<i>The Sunday Independent</i>
<i>LitNet</i>	<i>The Witness</i>
<i>Mail &amp; Guardianonline: Books</i>	<i>Transformation</i>
<i>Outer West Local News.</i>	

## Afrika, Tatamkhulu

*Mr Chameleon: An Autobiography.* Tatamkhulu Afrika. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005. 424pp. R169.

For all its apparent frankness and passion, the autobiography of the late, acclaimed poet Tatamkhulu Afrika (he changed his name many times) tells

an oblique tale. It is a deeply interesting read, threaded throughout with issues of race, homosexuality and 'friendship' – a minefield of marginality, acceptance and one-upmanship, negotiated with the intense awareness of one who was already a writer at 17. This finely textured, magnificently written account of a life often dark with anger, anguish and self-doubt is crammed with telling observation and poetic compression.

Jane Rosenthal. *Mail & Guardianonline: Books*. October 14 2005. <http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2005/2005oct/051014-texture.html>

The hefty autobiography of Tatamkhulu Afrika is both fascinating and infuriating, awe-inspiring and yet often repellent. It begins with sex and guilt, and he rarely lets up his cardinal preoccupation, the testing of masculinity. On the close connections between Afrika's poetry and fiction and his autobiography one can imagine a pile of dissertations emerging. Born in Egypt, adopted by South African Methodists, Afrika 'crossed over' from white identity to black and converted to Islam. Afrika can write marvellously – he is acutely observant, vivid, and capable of tenderness and humour - but some features of his style are quite awful (his macho verbal gestures – scabrous, often obscene – and some leaden sentence structures and redundancies). Moreover, the severe privations and cruelties he endured, and his profound psychological scarring, make this a harrowing book. All in all, credit to the publishers, Jacana, for taking this on.

Chris Dunton. *The Sunday Independent*. December 4 2005: 17.

### **'Anna'**

*It's me, Anna*. Elbie Lötter, translated by Marianne Thamm. Cape Town: Kwela, 2005. 224pp. R153.

The major theme of this fictionalised treatment of a true story is utterly harrowing: rape/incest compounded by maternal neglect, with a side-serving of child-battering, suicide and murder, all set in a South African family to which South Africans can immediately, if unwillingly, relate. The story,

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written in the first person, is about the Anna, the daughter of a woman who worked in 'Bantu Administration' department of the apartheid government, and a sergeant in the South African Police. When her parents divorce, her mother's new partner is a repeat rapist of young female children and Anna becomes his next victim.

James Mitchell. *The Star*. September 1 2005.

This book has sold very well since its publication in both English and its original Afrikaans version, and it won the Bookseller's Choice Award. So what was it that annoyed me so much? The story was not very well written, though it was clear and eloquent, giving many of the gory details honestly which, no doubt, helped to sell it. But I began to feel disturbed as the story of child abuse – and the parallel narrative of the adult's revenge - went along. Anna never did shoot her abusive stepfather; her abused half-sister didn't commit suicide. So what else in the story isn't true? Furthermore, the wicked stepfather, who sexually violated his son, stepdaughter Anna and daughter was never confronted, charged or sentenced – he died a free and blameless man. And as the author has chosen to remain anonymous, writing under the pseudonym 'Elbie Lötter', his memory remains so. I have a real problem with her anonymity; not only for the reasons just mentioned but also because it perpetrates the myth that victims of child abuse are somehow tainted. It left me feeling like a voyeur. There's no healing in the book, and while the author has my total, deep sympathy and compassion, I cannot recommend this book.

Beverley Roos Muller. *Cape Times, Tonight*. September 1 2005: 13.

### **Awolowo, Hannah Idowu Dideolu**

*A Memoir of the Jewel*. H.I.D. Awolowo. Ife-Ife, Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2003. 112 pp. \$29.95.

This account of the powerful woman and leader, based on tape recordings, takes the form of a natural conversation, however, the reader is hard-pressed

to form any accurate impression of Awolowo because of poor editing. Consequently, this work constitutes a missed opportunity of disclosing to the world an exceptional figure in Nigerian public life.

Vincent T. Maphai. *The African Publishing Record* 31 (3), 2005: 221.

### **Bailey, Barbara**

*An Eccentric Marriage: Living with Jim*. Barbara Bailey. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2005. 288pp. R175.

Barbara Bailey sees her late husband Jim, proprietor of *Drum* magazine, as a hero because of his contribution to the black press in South Africa. Although we do not come much closer to understanding him, her diary records of how she fell in love with him when she was almost 12 and he was 31 hold the strongest appeal of the memoir.

Maureen Isaacson. *The Sunday Independent*. November 13 2005: 18.

### **Bateman, Paul**

*The Million Rand Teaspoon*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006. 256 pp. R133.00.

This book is about Bateman's life-long struggle with drug addiction, not only from his perspective but also from that of his family and close friends. His story takes us from his beginnings in Johannesburg, to London, then back to South Africa to Durban and, inevitably, back to Hillbrow, Johannesburg. I strongly recommend this book for teenagers and their parents for it will serve as a deterrent for would-be drug-users, and educate their parents and families.

Nikki Ridley. *Outer West Local News*. October 2006: 14.

**Bosman, Herman Charles**

*Herman Charles Bosman: Between the Lines.* Valerie Rosenberg. Cape Town: Struik, 2005. 261pp. R150.

Valerie Rosenberg, who has previously written a biography and made a documentary of South African writer Herman Charles Bosman, says in her preface that she needed to streamline the material and also 'deal with information I hadn't really wanted to find'. The information is unsavoury, to say the least: he was probably the incestuous offspring of his mother and her brother; he killed his step-brother; he himself gave abortions to his wives. The book contains interesting drawings by Bosman and his widow, Helena, as well as unusual photographs. However, Rosenberg – in not giving indexical references to statements or insinuations – lets this biography lack authenticity.

Renée Rautenbach. *Pretoria News*. October 31 2005:16.

**Cope, Michael**

*Intricacy: A Meditation on Memory.* Michael Cope. Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005. 320pp. R165.

This remarkable South African 'memoir' – inadequate word – is well-named by its author: it could also be called a mosaic, tapestry or kaleidoscope, formed of numerous pieces or threads – people, events, feelings, thoughts (remembered or half-remembered), pieces of information and 'meditations' on many topics including memory itself, Eastern mysticism, South African politics, archaeology, adolescence, broken families and death. Contributing to the complex weave is the large number of photographs and sketches. Cope's prose is ruthlessly honest, metaphor-rich, semi-detached but compassionate. The colourful, often wounded presence of the author's mother, Lesley, helps to provide a persistent thread through this superficially 'bitty' work. It is hard to do justice to the richness of this intelligent, moving, panoramic book.

David Pike. *The Witness*. October 26 2005:12.

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Although it's decidedly quirky, Capetonian Michael Cope's intriguing memoir never sacrifices accessibility for the sake of device. Fragmented, the book explores the mechanics of memory, and although some of the academic references Cope weaves into the thread of the work tend to irritate eventually, there are some fascinating theories about what we remember and why. Also satisfying are Cope's beautiful use of language and sometimes captivating evocation of an unconventional Cape childhood.

Stevie Godson. *Saturday Dispatch*. 8 April 2006: 19.

Mike Cope is a man of many parts: novelist, poet, jeweller, martial arts practitioner, devotee of Eastern thought. All these enterprises inform *Intricacy*, for it includes stories, finely delineated sense-impressions, reflections on Buddhist and Hindu practices, all arranged and presented with an attention to detail. Cope is the scion of creative parents (the novelist Jack and painter Lesley), and the book is in part a complex homage to them both. Through fits and starts, we trace the outlines of the author's formative life in the fifties in Cape Town, and the breakup of his parents' marriage when he was six. The tangled family history on both sides, including a host of characters moving around the world, flits ghostlike through these pages. These entrances and exits exemplify the writer's recurring interest in the slippery nature of memory.

The book is divided into nine parts, each broken via inconsequent sub-headings that read like this: 'PART 1: intricacy inelelegant hummock polka destroy derelict guest Pliny consensus predisposition bloc forgot beating modern', with each word heading a sub-section. As you can see, there's no obvious connection between these words, and Mike Cope has broken his text into a series of passages – some short, some quite long – that are made to fit these improbable headings. Result? A sense of contrivance, also some frustration. The bitty sub-headings, and the overloading of topics, undermine a book that bursts with insights, flavours, and the moving burden of a son's complex love.

Guy Willoughby. *Cape Times*. January 24 2006: 7.

### **Ebersohn, Wessel**

*In Touching Distance*. Wessel Ebersohn. Parkview: Paper Movie Publishing, 2005. 176pp. R150.

*In Touching Distance* calls to mind two well-loved, nature-tinged reminiscences: Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* and Henry Thoreau's *Walden*. Wessel Ebersohn's deceptively gentle memoir describes how in 1987 he withdrew with his wife Miriam, their daughters Tess and Liz, and grandchildren Kathy and Sheena 'from Johannesburg's traffic, smog, crime and frantic pace'. They stayed in the depths of the Knysna forest for seven years, in a humble woodcutter's cottage, running a full-time, avian restore-and-rescue operation. If politics prompted the Ebersohns into the forest, they found politics waiting for them there too. All the time they were there, they were under surveillance by the apartheid Security Police, especially after the twice-banned novelist was commissioned to track the terrible political struggles in the townships of Oudtshoorn.

If you've ever found the world too much with you, this quiet, thought-stirring book will resonate in the heart's deep core.

Guy Willoughby. *Cape Times, Review*. August 16 2005: 7.

### **Fairhead, Nigel**

*When all else falls away: Nigel Fairhead's story*. Nigel Fairhead with Marianne Thamm. Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005. 250pp. R110.

Arranged chronologically, this is Nigel Fairhead's candidly told story of how he has battled addictions (mainly to heroin), his years of spiritual exploration in London and India, and his attempts to come to terms with the murder of his wife, Brenda, and daughter in 2000 when on holiday in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Far from depressing, Nigel's book is moving; it is the story of one man's dealing with great loss, and it's inspiring.

Jeanne Viall. *Cape Argus, Tonight*. September 29 2005: 13.

Fairhead's story is an interesting one. The narrative is supported by letters from Brenda, his wife, to her parents in Australia, and this helps to bring a sense of her spirit into the story. Kia, his daughter, was just 11 when she and her mother were murdered while holidaying in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. I found myself getting impatient with the fact that Fairhead kept returning to heroin, and felt that a large part of the story had not been told: how or where do you find the strength to go on after such a loss? Perhaps, to be fair, such questions cannot be answered.

Arja Salafranca. *The Star, Tonight*. October 21 2005: 14.

*When All Else Falls Away* is more than a detailed account of the events which led up to the murder of Brenda and Kia Fairhead. With astonishing resolution and piercing candour the author has made public his immense grief and his life's journey towards learning acceptance of life's lessons, overcoming adversity and continuing to find love, peace and happiness. In deeply personal and poignant chapters, Nigel tells of the frantic search to find his missing wife and daughter. The narrative is enhanced with family photographs, letters written by his late wife, Brenda, colour copies of his daughter Kia's school projects and newspaper reports. The final chapter, a dialogue between co-author Marianne Thamm and a clinical psychologist, is 'a guide for those readers who might need a broader understanding of the effects of trauma'.

Michelle McGrane. *LitNet*. November 22 2005.

[http://www.litnet.co.za/reviews/falls\\_away.asp](http://www.litnet.co.za/reviews/falls_away.asp)

### **Hirson, Denis**

*We walk straight so you better get out the way*. Denis Hirson. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2006. 168pp. R97.

In 1970 the American painter and writer Joe Brainard published an innovatory work that was to inspire successors across three continents. Titled *I Remember*, in its final form this comprises a thousand-plus short



entries, each beginning with the phrase 'I remember'. Brainard's idea inspired French novelist Georges Perec and South African Denis Hirson, first with his highly successful *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)* and now with its sequel, *We Walk Straight*. In his first volume he deals largely with his childhood, in the second volume the story moves into the 'seventies and beyond. It also modifies the Brainard formula more fully and successfully than perhaps any other contribution has done: there is much more consolidation and counterpointing of individual entries and some are much longer and much more 'worked through' stylistically. Hirson still dips into his childhood, but with the worsening political situation in South Africa (his own father was imprisoned by the apartheid state), the tone is often dark and anxious. *I Remember King Kong* was a fine book and *We Walk Straight* is finer still.

Chris Dunton. *The Sunday Independent*. January 8 2006: 18.

In his second volume of memoirs, Hirson departs frequently from the clipped format of the original. Here some paragraphs evolve into smoother prose and, occasionally, distance (or merciful amnesia) takes its toll and 'I remember' becomes 'I don't remember'.

The recollections are as quirky as ever, the observations as sharp and witty, the metaphors as apt, but this is a more sombre work. In his narrative, Hirson does not 'walk straight'; he 'wheels around', reverting again and again to topics close to his heart – journeys, exile, the meaning of home, the nature of freedom.

This captivating book is funny and moving and tender and ultimately tells us more about South Africa and South Africans than many a more obviously serious work.

Pat Schwartz. *Mail & Guardianonline: Books*. January 13 2006. <http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2006/2006jan/060113-boyhood.html>

## Jacobs, Rayda

*The Mecca Diaries*. Rayda Jacobs. Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005. 160pp. R165.95.

This account of her hajj by Cape Town writer, Rayda Jacobs, is part diary, part guidebook and part spiritual memoir. Jacobs is deeply affected by her participation in the spiritual event and, despite severe hardship and illness, repeatedly refers to her good fortune to participate. She also gives the non-Muslim reader a good insight into the rituals.

Ina Randall. *The Herald, TGIF*. September 2 2005: 10.

*The Mecca Diaries* is written as a journal and guidebook; it is simply told, without a climax, a documentation of events, rather than experiences, which lacks personality. I found this a flat read which did nothing to inspire me to perform the pilgrimage.

Fouzia van der Fort. *Cape Argus*. September 29 2005: 13.

### **Kaplan, Jonathan**

*Contact wounds: A War Surgeon's Education*. Jonathan Kaplan. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2005. 288 pp. R151.95.

This autobiography covers the author's experiences in diverse conflict zones in the world. Kaplan exposes corrupt governments, foolish soldiers and children in rags bloated with self-importance, as well as the incompetence of health systems in general. But the book is more than this: it is also a meditation on memory, truth and storytelling. The book recounts experiences in Durban, South Africa, on a kibbutz in the desert in the south of Israel, Madagascar, Angola and Iraq; but it is the psychological journey which makes the greatest impact. The abrupt arrivals and departures of minor characters can be confusing, and Kaplan's chronology is not always flawless. Nevertheless, it is a good story, being both a celebration of medicine as well as a warning about its future.

\* Diane Awerbuck. *Rapport: Perspektief*. May 28 2006: 4.

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In writing *Contact Wounds*, Jonathan Kaplan set out to explore the influences that led him to volunteer as a combat-zone surgeon. He takes us with him on this journey – from a teenage pilgrimage to Israel to a searing account of the horrors of war in Angola and Iraq. There's no pretentious idealism or indulgent soul-searching, just the unfolding of ordinary events that have added up to an extraordinary existence. And a story told with charming candour and a sprinkling of wry humour.

G.W.B. *Femina*. May 2006: 108.

### **Krige, Corné**

*The right place at the wrong time*. Corné Krige with Peter Bills. Cape Town: Zebra, 2005. 272pp. R184

The autobiography of the 30-year old ex-Springbok rugby captain Corné Krige provided catharsis for Krige, he says. Krige writes candidly about the controversial camp the South African rugby players were forced to attend before a World Cup rugby series. It is no wonder the book is on its second print run.

Maureen Isaacson. *The Sunday Independent*. November 13 2005: 18.

### **Levin, Adam**

*Aidsafari: A Memoir of my Journey with Aids*. Adam Levin. Cape Town: Zebra, 2005. 224pp. R129.95.

Levin was doing pretty well as an award-winning journalist and an about-to-be-published author of *The Wonder Safaris* when he discovered that he was HIV-positive and had developed AIDS. This could be a very depressing book to read, and indeed there are parts that are extremely touching and difficult to read, but instead it reflects an honesty and triumph of the human spirit that is rather uplifting. In this book, which is an important part of the canon of literature on HIV/AIDS in South Africa, Levin tells his story with

style and panache, although underlying the story is the sense that this was a deeply difficult story to tell. Ultimately you should read this book not only because it is an important one, but also because it is a bloody good read.

Jennifer Crocker. *Cape Times*. September 12 2005: 12.

Adam Levin is incapable of producing an ordinary memoir on HIV/AIDS. Most of the time, while his account is almost gruesomely sad, it is also funny. All his life he had been travelling the world to find answers and here he was forced to be still and take a more difficult journey. If you want to know about physical horrors of AIDS, he doesn't spare you, but there's also the loss of self, the way he becomes invisible because people are scared to deal with his pain. It's a fight for survival, but it's also a glorious celebration of life and everything that's worth fighting for.

D.B. *Pretoria News*. August 22 2005: 8.

### **Nuttall, Michael**

*Number Two to Tutu: A Memoir*. Michael Nuttall. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003. 178 pp. R70.

The author, former Bishop of the Church of the Province of South Africa (Anglican), has provided us with his insights and memories of the role he played during the turbulent years of the last quarter of the 20th century when the old apartheid system was dying and a new South Africa was being born. It chronicles the role of Desmond Tutu and the relationship the author had with him, as his right-hand man, during those years. We learn of crises faced, advice given or rejected, and personalities encountered, including F.W. de Klerk, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Nelson Mandela. Sometimes we are left wishing to know more about the ideas, thoughts and actions of the author himself, but we are glad to have this glimpse of those around him. Nuttall's memoir is an interesting account that should grace the shelves of any serious collector on South Africa.

Paul H. Thomas. *The African Publishing Record* 31 (1), 2005: 221-2.

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### **Simons, Ray Alexander**

*All My Life and All My Strength.* Ray Alexander Simons. Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004. 378 pp. R160.

Ray Alexander Simons' autobiography, published shortly after her death in 2004, tells the story of her life, from her birth in Latvia to the indignities of old age. But primarily it is the story of an activist who played a prominent role in political and trade union organisation in South Africa. She joined the communist party in South Africa a few days after her arrival in 1929 from Latvia, and founded the Food and Canning Workers' Union in 1941. In 1951, she was banned by the apartheid state, but nevertheless stood for Parliament as a so-called 'native' representative – a seat she was not allowed to take. When her husband, Jack Simons, was about to be forced from his post at the University of Cape Town because of his political leanings, the couple went into exile in 1965, leaving behind their two children. They returned to South Africa in 1990. Ray's energy and courage are inspiring, yet this book left me disappointed because it fails to acknowledge the difficulties and failures along with the achievements, and there is an absence of analysis (for instance, of Stalinism) and self-reflection. Moreover, an element of egotism pervades the narrative, along with some failure to acknowledge the role of others. Furthermore, the indexing is inaccurate.

Jan Theron. *Transformation* 58. 2005: 97-105.

### **Uys, Pieter-Dirk**

*Between the Devil and the Deep: A Memoir of Acting and Reacting.* Pieter-Dirk Uys. Cape Town: Zebra, 2005. 288pp. R150.

Pieter-Dirk Uys's career is one of the most engaging stories of the recent South African past. Shy scion of an old Cape Afrikaans family, he discovered the theatre in the turbulent '60s, hit the University of Cape Town's drama school running and, in the embattled '70s, he cut his teeth as angry political playwright at Cape Town's legendary Space Theatre. By his own admission, it was the '80s that made him. He discovered his talent for one-man revue and conjured up on stage two extraordinary characters: P.W.

Botha, dictatorial head of the apartheid state, and Evita Bezuidenhout. He traces the bumpy adjustments necessary in the '90s when black-white polarities of the anti-apartheid struggle became redundant.

The book might more accurately be titled *Advertisements for Myself* and on the whole he writes with the too-easy patter of the revue artist. However, the valuable bits are the asides on the craft and art of acting, and he gives some eminently practical advice.

Guy Willoughby. *Cape Times*. October 7 2005: 13.

Veteran satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys's absorbing, often delicious reminiscences afford, for any South African over the age of 50, a brisk walk down memory lane. There is a superb collection of photographs, including Uys in all his guises and disguises. Uys writes honestly throughout, sometimes clinically.

Derek Wilson. *Cape Argus*. October 24 2005: 18.

## Multiple subjects

### **Fox, Justin and Mike Copeland, Cameron Ewart-Smith, Don Pinnock**

*Just Add Dust: Overland from Cape to Cairo*. Justin Fox, Mike Copeland, Cameron Ewart-Smith and Don Pinnock. Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2004. 244 pp. R120.

This is a travel account of one of the great journeys of the world, the overland trip from one end of the African continent to the other. What sets this book apart from many is that, as South Africans, for decades this trip was unimaginable for the authors. Also unusual, is the fact that this book breaks the journey into four sections, each written by the person who travelled that leg. Invariably some authors are more engaging than others.

These travellers, equipped with a brand-new Land Rover, manage to avoid

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the potential danger of not interacting with the locals and the book is full of interesting anecdotes about places they visit and the characters they encounter. The book also integrates history into the descriptions of the places they travel.

*Just Add Dust* will be interesting to the armchair traveller and to libraries that maintain collections of travel writing.

Kenneth G. Kelly. *The African Publishing Record* 31 (1), 2005: 27-28.

### **Head, Bessie and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan**

*Imaginative Trespasser: Letters between Bessie Head and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 1963-1977.* Patrick Cullinan. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005. 288pp. R174.

*Imaginative Trespasser* makes it clear that Bessie Head was one of Africa's great letter writers as well as one of the continent's finest novelists. Writing for the most part from Serowe, Botswana, where she lived as an exile from South Africa, to her friends Patrick (a distinguished poet) and Wendy Cullinan, Head describes her life as an alien in Botswana, her struggles to support herself and her child, and her gradual discovery of her own powers. Cullinan's commentary on the letters, and the context he provides, are indispensable to the book which shows Head as both victim (of apartheid and of hostility in Botswana) and as fascinating, acute artist.

Margaret Lenta. *The Sunday Independent*. August 7 2005: 18.

Most of the letters between Head and her friends the Cullinans are not pretty, but then, neither was her life. Cullinan has tried to remain as faithful as possible to Head's writing and tried not to doctor the letters. This book is a useful reference for those studying literature.

Ruth Bhengu. *Sowetan*. September 6 2005: 11.

*Imaginative Trespasser* is a record of the deep and generous friendship that existed between Patrick and Wendy Cullinan and Bessie Head over a period

of almost 15 years, until its sudden and perplexing end in 1977. With the Cullinan's help, in the early '60s Head was able to leave South Africa on an exit permit for the Bechuanaland Protectorate, now Botswana. Cullinan's ostensible objective in compiling and publishing their correspondence is to confirm Head's power as a writer. The letters are intensely moving in their own right as a testimony of a life of extreme privation and anguish, but also of courage and strength.

What makes this book so utterly compelling is that apart from the letters providing access to a great deal of biographical information on Head which otherwise would remain unknown, Cullinan's comments contextualising the correspondence almost palpably enact his own anguished attempts to find clues in the history of their relationship which would explain its shocking and unexpected end. Although the madness with which she had been cursed all those years ago never wandered far from Head, Cullinan commendably refrains from explaining her otherwise inexplicable behaviour in terms of mental illness. In the same way that Head uses writing 'to ease any pain I feel', Cullinan attempts to purge himself of his sense of betrayal (the extent of which only became apparent with the publication in 1991 of Head's letters to another friend, Randolph Vigne); the reader is moved by the lingering doubt that either enjoyed full resolution.

Head was not politically correct, and she was dishonest and prejudiced in some ways, often flamboyantly staging her own life to suit her subjective viewpoints. But whatever her flaws, she was so intensely affected by the suffering and injustice in the world around her that it seemed an almost somatic experience. Rejected by both black and white sides of the racial divide, she nevertheless was clear that she belonged to and was committed to Africa; she wrote, 'Although Africa doesn't happen to need me I need it .... I'm going to descend on this goddamn continent like a thunderbolt'.

Fiona Moolla. *Cape Times, Review*. September 6 2005: 7.

### **Khama, Seretse and Ruth (né Williams)**

*Seretse & Ruth*. Wilf and Trish Mbanga. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2005. 376 pp. R150.



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This well-researched version of the story of the marriage of Sir Seretse Khama of Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and Ruth Williams offers fascinating insights into their famous inter-racial union, which scandalised the world back in the 1950s. Although laced with saccharine, it is worth reading as political history. To say that Seretse and Ruth shook the very foundation of British foreign policy in Africa is no overstatement and each made enormous personal sacrifices in their commitment to each other: Ruth lost her job on the very day the engagement was announced and was disowned by her father and Seretse was prevented from assuming his rightful chieftainship and was forced into exile for five years, although he was ultimately able to play a meaningful political role as president of his country in an emerging democratic order.

Andrea Weiss. *Cape Argus*. January 30 2006: 12.

Authors Wilf and Trish Mbanga, themselves a mixed-race couple, have written a fascinating and empathetic account of the marriage of Seretse Khama, crown prince of the Bamangwato of Botswana to Ruth Williams, a British woman, a relationship that captured the imagination of the world and unleashed a legal and diplomatic crisis that continued for almost two decades. Through meticulous research and access to obscure government documents, the authors shed light on the political intrigue and they uncover a story of duplicity, with the British government as chief villain.

Nalini Naidoo. *The Witness*. December 28 2005:12.

### **South African, childhood**

*Childhood: South Africans Recall their Past*. Adrian Hadland (ed.). Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005. 256pp. R140.

Personages in this book are from diverse backgrounds: there is the master entrepreneur Raymond Ackerman, writer and academic Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, singer Miriam Makeba, Winnie and Nelson Mandela and others. Desmond Tutu, however, is conspicuously missing. The stories, taking us back by up to 200 years, tell of hope and the triumph of the human spirit,

even though they emanate from an era filled with anguish, pain and loss. In this book, South Africa's past is given human faces.

Sabata-Mpho Mokae. *Mail & Guardianonline: Books*. September 2 2005.  
<http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2005>

There are rural and urban childhoods. Some writers recall their mothers having to smooth over the dung floors of their huts; others recall their mothers trying to straighten and smooth unruly hair and wearing trim suits. But all are recalled vividly, emotionally and eloquently. If the past is a foreign country, these writers somehow found a way into that past and have brought it all magnificently to life in these excerpts from autobiographies.

Arja Salafranca. *LitNet*. October 10 2005.  
<http://www.litnet.co.za/seminarroom/childhood.asp>

## **South African prisoners on Robben Island**

*Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid. Fran Lisa Buntman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 340 pp. \$23.00.*

Robben Island and its illustrious prisoners occupy a central, even hallowed, place in the chronicles of the South African liberation struggle. Drawing on 90 oral testimonies (71 by a wide and representative sample of prisoners) and other archived documents, Fran Lisa Buntman examines the Island's wider influence on the liberation struggle. She uncovers the history of 'unsung heroes' among the prisoners, letting them speak through interviews, and explores some interesting insights into prisoner attitudes, for example to homosexuality. Despite, or perhaps because of, Buntman's comprehensive coverage of the 1962-92 period there is room for further research. Nevertheless, this is an important book deserving wide readership.

Peter Limb. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31 (3), 2005. 666-668.

Judith Lütge Coullie

### **South African women**

*The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*. Judith Lütge Coullie (ed.). Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2004. xii + 386 pp. R190.

Judith Coullie's superbly designed and selected anthology of South African women's writing should appeal to the general public as well as to scholars and students in the areas of life writing, post-colonial literature and women's studies. The extracts selected are vivid, varied and intriguing. For anyone new to South African women's writing, the selections are sufficiently brief to provide a bird's eye view of the field. At the same time, they are sufficiently substantial to give an idea of each writer's concerns and style, and thus could act as guides to more focused research. This ground-breaking collection is also ideally crafted to serve as a teaching anthology, as the extracts function as self-contained texts which can be analysed in their own right.

Susan Tridgell. *Life Writing* 3 (1), 2006: 149-151.