

## Review Article<sup>1</sup>

# *Country of My Skull: Guilt and Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*

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LAMENTABLY, THE SOUTH AFRICAN autobiographical literature of human rights is a flourishing one. Prison memoirs are prominent—Herman Charles Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug* (1949), Breyten Breytenbach's *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1983)—and so are the accounts of witnesses to humanitarian catastrophe. At least overseas, the country's most influential non-fiction book of the early 1990s was Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1990), a white South African's suffocatingly convincing failure to find logic and hope in his native country. (Incidentally, J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* [1981] was the most influential novel overseas during the same period. In Coetzee's fable, "defensive" use of torture destroys a society from within.)

As the title *Country of My Skull: Guilt and Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* suggests, Antjie Krog's book on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) takes further the personalization of witness. An established Afrikaans poet, Krog recently embarked on journalism and reported, under the surname Samuel, for South African Broadcasting Company radio on the TRC full time from the start of public hearings in April 1996 until January 1998, six months before the hearings ended. (Some functions of the TRC, such as the granting of reparations, will probably continue for several more years.) Since the Commission tried to deal with atrocities near their sites, Krog travelled along through the country, enduring the suspicions of activists that she was a dilettante and the livid allegations of the right wing that she was betraying her white, Dutch-descended race. It is race, not politics, that obsesses her. The book opens with the Afrikaner Resistance Movement—

loud, hairy neo-Nazis, but almost pathetic in their worn paramilitary clothes—throwing its weight around in legislative committee, and ends with a rapturous day on her parents' farm in the Free State, the centre of Afrikanerdom. In between, she shows the Commission's proceedings played out in her life as one of an Afrikaner. She makes herself out to be involved, implicated with extreme intimacy in the violence through which Afrikaners acquired and hung onto their beautiful and fertile land.

Her attachment to land and kin is defining, and is a common trait among even urbanized Afrikaners like herself, but her unusual sensitivity takes away the usual defensiveness. Tactile intensity inhabits a description of her waking up, on a visit to the farm, in her warm childhood bed to the noise of her brothers raising the alarm during one of their regular patrols for stock thieves. In sustained helplessness, she experiences her own and her parents' terror (4-5). The next day, she faces her brothers: "Hendrik touches the knuckles of his right hand lightly. They are swollen. 'Do you hit them?' I ask, numb" (12). These scenes are cut into scenes of the TRC being planned and organized. Later, the shift is between the hearings themselves and her life at the time. The TRC is like a thin membrane stretched across the author's throbbing guilt as daughter, sister, wife, mother and writer in an enclave that has, until now, been secure amid chaos. But this seems to oversimplify an extremely complex narrative. There are the confusion and exhaustion of a new reporter in a physically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding assignment; the surreal strains of constant work and travel contribute to her psychosomatic symptoms and to her brief collapses into violence; the long bull sessions with colleagues are a source of intimidation as well as of support. Then there is the violent controversy surrounding the proceedings: she flees a fire in a building containing TRC offices, and helps defend herself and her family from obscene harassment and death threats. All of these circumstances merge with the testimony about murder, torture and rape, and with her recognition, from childhood, of the ideology, the words, the very body shapes and hairstyles of the right-wing perpetrators. The result is a depiction of the most diverse experiences coming inexorably together in the aftermath of colo-

nialism. Diaristic entries, exploration of academic sources, interviews, short essays, her own and others' letters, poetry, press copy—all of these are interpenetratively linked with TRC testimony (often verbatim) and her comments on it, to bring the theme of unity in diversity to a genre level. The culture, the history of blacks and whites are a common tragedy and create common potential, this structure teaches.

The sheer ambition of the project is impressive. The book is almost operatic in its various and artificial splendour surrounding a protagonist's experience. But it is this set-up that underlies my reservations as well as my admiration. As Krog records, there were submissions to the TRC by people asking for amnesty for their mere failure to do more against apartheid. An artist confessed to not painting apartheid atrocities, and a group of youths came into TRC offices late at night immediately before the deadline for amnesty application; they insisted on applying, because their conversation in a bar had turned to the subject of apathy: they wanted pardon for being apathetic (121-12). Tellingly, Krog relays these incidents without irony about idleness and exhibitionism and the drawing of attention away from genuinely heavy business. Her own narrative stance is not essentially different from the grandstanders', and is contrary to the TRC's mission of setting apart serious blame. Would the victims and the perpetrators consider Krog's book respectful, and should not their point of view be the one that matters?

But the issue is in actuality heart-breakingly involved. It is in any case wrong to judge Krog wholly by her faithfulness to the TRC, of which she was not a functionary, and which has itself been accused of betrayal. Many troubling elements in the book seem in fact to be due to her *adherence*, manifested in artistic approach, to the TRC's principles and practices.

The TRC was anti-Nuremberg by design, dispensing with many legal formalities. The institution evoked a vast compendium of stories, but without timely certification of their truth, so that the stories came to be seen more as illustrations of one or another point of view than as new realities in themselves, from which new ways of looking at human beings could develop—as was the case at Nuremberg. The minimum objection would be to the TRC

stories as unprocessed material. They *invite* an account unified by rhetorical fiat; it is actually admirable that Krog, after spending so much time listening to so many humble maimed and bereaved people, and to some of the arrogant psychotics who preyed on them, could master her reactions enough to achieve any literary construct. Many white middle-class viewers of the nightly television news segments, only a few minutes long, on the TRC became exasperated. I was stunned by the succession of short summaries alone, and unable to say what they might mean for the nation and for myself as a resident; I identify with Krog's struggle with some of the jagged pieces of Africa, and I could see myself, in her place, foregrounding my own experience, out of despair of understanding others'.

But Krog, paradoxically, does not go far enough in her synthesis; there is too little that is shaped, too little of a story. She is unlucky in having Malan in the background, that relentless storyteller, whose even less yielding material (his life from childhood, the whole of modern South African history culminating in the 1980s) rose up like a single piece of music—though with no over-simplification or sentimentality—because of his years of research and writing. It is hard not to suspect that, in her concern to get a book out while the TRC was still in open session and public opinion was still engaged, Krog did not take the necessary time. Sometimes this is fortunate; individual scenes have a freshness and boldness that probably would have disappeared from subsequent drafts. Her confrontation with former president P. W. Botha, for example, shows a savory nerviness: she realizes, when he answers a challenge from her with pompous incoherence and a dull stare, that there is no strategy and no self-contained ideology behind his bellowing and his pious poses. He is simply an idiot. "And we have been governed by this stupidity for decades" (270-71). The "Big Crocodile" renowned for slyness is, then, nothing but a product as well as a producer of the stultifying environment of authoritarianism—only his aggressive instincts have preserved him. Of course, this cannot be wholly right: F. W. de Klerk, undoubtedly a more intelligent man, got rid of Botha and apartheid from inside the system. But the caution and qualification usual in a more worked-over prose

might have emptied Krog's observation of its immediacy—the vividness of her revelatory look into reptilian eyes—and immediacy is the great strength of the book.

But in a book on this subject, such immediacy can be disturbing. Lack of overall structure is a difficulty especially in that the TRC shared the lack; Krog's approach does nothing to mitigate the TRC's. As the TRC evolved, the discomfort about it in the world press came from roughly the following shortcomings: there was no cross-examination of the alleged victims by the alleged perpetrators or their representatives; the TRC took away the right of victims to prosecute or sue, but did not have to give any specific reparations in return (the reparations issue is still pending); there were no clear criteria for who got a polite invitation to testify and who got a subpoena, and who was allowed to defy either; alleged perpetrators could go to regular courts and get injunctions against those about to testify to the TRC; senior officials in the present government got amnesty without public hearings, so that the public has no idea what the amnesty was for; political parties could interfere in testimony (previewing and vetting members' confessions and accusations, threatening, retaliating). Taken together, these features made the TRC a phenomenon of the political and social moment, and not of the better-enclosed, if more artificial, space called "justice." Parallel faults in Krog's text make it a phenomenon of emotional moments rather than of enduring insights. Her choice of testimony to cover (though she does hit most of the big media events, such as the Winnie Madikizela-Mandela circus and the evasions of P. W. Botha) is rather arbitrary looking, as are her choices of how to cover it. Her journalistic analysis is skimpy; she nearly always shrinks from exposition and conclusion.

In both the proceedings and this account of them, the sufferings of the victims are publicly devalued because recognizable structures of authority—legal, narrative—are missing. The crimes are not "real" crimes because there are no trials. The stories are not "true" stories because they have no background or beginnings or endings, which we hold, consciously or unconsciously, as markers of real experience: our individual lives are real to us because we know them in a sort of wholeness. In a

disrupted society, human rights abusers reduce their victims to entities out of time and space, with no past, no attachments and no future except insofar as these can be useful to the abusers' immediate needs. In a sense, both the TRC and Krog have extended the abuses of apartheid, the TRC by sacrificing both truth and reconciliation to political imperatives, and Krog by manipulating other lives like inanimate materials in an abstract design.

The most pitiful instance of this is the story of Rita Mazibuko (183-84), an African National Congress operative her own comrades allegedly detained on a charge of spying, and raped and tortured with bizarre persistence and brutality. She claimed to be living in poverty because the ANC had sold her house and furniture—an accusation that gives a familiar pattern to her version of events: her relative wealth as a diligent seamstress and the ANC's extortion habit would have been the reasons to single her out, on the premise that any property a black person had must come from cooperation with the regime. Both sides in the struggle over apartheid financed their activities through organized crime, but the black side ironically launched most of its violence against blacks. According to Mazibuko, Mathews Phosa, now premier of the province of Mpumalanga, was aware of her persecution (she had appealed to him to end it, she said), and telephoned her before her TRC appearance to try to shut her up. After she testified, he claimed in the media never to have heard of her and threatened to sue (but, suspiciously, seems not to have followed up; even more suspiciously, it was he who declared that ANC members did not need amnesty because their war was just: plainly, he would have protected the rapists and torturers no matter how much he knew). The Truth Commission was apparently silent, though here, as often, Krog's account of what took place is somewhat sidelong. Krog is sympathetic, and indignant at the woman's friendlessness, but since Krog is not an investigative journalist any more than the TRC is an investigative body (though it does have an Investigative Unit and a Research Unit, these are not politically independent, and infighting made them even less effective than expected), the testimony falls like a pebble through water—shallow water: an hour or two in front of the TRC, a page and a half in the book.

Krog will find defenders to argue that the mimetic nature of her work is appropriate: what is fragmented and uncertain in life should be similar in literature. The ideological premise behind this is that structure is hegemonic and oppresses. As the TRC shed structures from the judicial process in order to open it to more people, Krog's book has loose structures that do not imply authoritative judgment about meaning. The doing away with boundaries—of convention, of law, of taste—has for unmysterious reasons become a crusade in post-apartheid South Africa. But rather than opening up justice for the poor and illiterate and disenfranchised, the TRC may only have trivialized their plights by opening what was in effect a judicial discount store. Krog in her rendering may have reduced the victims (and perhaps even the perpetrators) to literary figurines purchased in that store.

One instance in particular suggests this: "The Shepherd's Tale" with its rather precious Chaucerian title warning of textual and critical highjinks. In this section (210-20), an illiterate Sesotho farm laborer identified only as "Lekotse" (why only one name? I never met a South African who didn't have a surname; the only thing apartheid reliably supplied to the poor was bureaucracy) describes a nighttime invasion of his home by whites and a disabling injury from their assault. Krog breaks the transcript into verse lines, which cover six pages, raising, first of all, the question of copyright. She treats the story as a literary work rather than as a public document so no journalistic license is likely to apply. Did Krog get permission to use this verbatim text at such length, or to alter its format, and what compensation did she offer the indigent author? I have never been more leery of postmodern appropriation than in reading Krog, or more inclined to call it ordinary theft. Perhaps a quarter of the book is quotation; typical is a reproduction of a whole poem—in Afrikaans, then translated—Krog attributes merely to "one of my students who came from Ladybrand" (208). There is no list of permissions; authors could have consented, but it is not evident that they did. It may seem pompous to say so, but the result demonstrates how important intellectual property rights are: even when Krog does not distort the material or skimp on attribution, she leaves texts in a state of confusion by quoting in a

fragmentary way but at lengths far beyond the scope of her commentary. The reader, especially the foreign reader, cannot know what is going on. The voices communicate less the more space they occupy; the longer they go on without intervention, the more obscurity builds up—not surprisingly, as the speakers are mainly poor, uneducated people further isolated through their victimization and its years of consequences. (Krog’s own narration, incidentally, does not have these excuses. She is ungenerous in history, in the translation of Afrikaans, and in countless other kinds of accommodation. The glossary at the end is perfunctory, and there is no index to help map out the scattered text. This is, however, only the first, South African edition. The North American one—to be published by Random House—may be more forthcoming.) It is an utterly normal circumstance that the shepherd has no special skill in speaking, even in his native language (to judge from the translation into English, probably an official one). I struggle to picture the crimes committed against him; at their clearest, they appear in choppy scenes, with laments and temporal slides separating them.

Controlled presentation in a courtroom (an uneducated witness, for example, gets coaching to avoid language that would offend or provoke scorn) and by a conventional second-hand narrator (who edits out at least repetitions and digressions) not only provides a privileged audience with ideological touchstones, but also interprets for previously excluded speakers and brings them plausibly into that audience’s world. A lot is said about the power of structures and conventions to distort, but what about their pressure toward representation? Both the courtroom and standard non-fiction narration demand the establishment of chronological consistency, for example, and of relationships of cause and effect. Lekotse’s story would be more “real” if the scenes were rearranged into the order in which they happened; he could have done this himself with a little help, but the “leader of testimony” here did not in fact lead testimony but only followed it, clearing up a few vital but obscure points, such as the political affiliation of Lekotse’s one son (214-15), which probably led to the attack. To imagine the testimony with no intervention at all is to realize how naive it is to think that the



oppressed can speak for themselves if the rest of us just stand back. Lekotse could not communicate even among the small, poor, politically weak group that understands his language. Standing back is abandonment. Krog herself quotes Ariel Dorfman as an advocate of this view: he retold stories from the secret Chilean Truth Commission, and his justification was that otherwise the stories would have disappeared (238).

But of course not all kinds of intervention are right, and some—political manipulation of testimony, for instance, which the TRC was not above allowing—are further exploitation. Not only might some of Krog's quoting be in the exploitative category, but some of her commentary may be as well. In the "Lekotse" section, she treats a real man's real misfortune (the testimony was under oath, and nothing appears to have contradicted it) as a text for abstract interpretation:

Lekotse constantly makes use of archetypes that support the theme of access to diversity. As a shepherd he is the leader and protector of his flock and family. He leads them to nourishment and safety: he is therefore the pathfinder to worlds that may enrich his group.

A door closes off a space, but also opens into it. Both these meanings are present in Lekotse's story. . . . (Note that the police, the jackals, burst into the house with dogs. Jackals are creatures on the move between night and day, life and death; dogs are bound to one place, the faithful guardians of unbreachable borders). (220)

This passage contains the outrageous implication that the point of both the experience and the testimony about it (any strong distinction between the two should be eschewed, because of the credibility of the man's narrative, and for the sake of giving him the benefit of the doubt; he does not even implicate individuals, so what is the cost of believing him?) is Jungian and structuralist symbolism. There is certainly some racism here. It is hard to imagine such frivolous treatment of a European survivor of a pogrom, to pick what is probably the closest Western parallel among human rights violations. What would Lekotse say if he could read the passage? He might try angry assertion: "I say I was a shepherd because I was one. The door existed and exists. I call the police jackals because they destroy life and livelihood. I mention dogs because dogs were there." More probably, like many South African black people, he would say that it is not

worthwhile to try to communicate with whites. This despairing attitude toward power can make for general despair, and the man might repeat what he said several times during his testimony about whites who, no matter how much he protested, no matter what he said, would not listen to him: he wanted and wants to die.

Though resistance on the part of an author to a confrontation with factual evil is natural, this resistance has to be overcome somehow, in the interest of the victim, so that he has at least the comfort that his experience fits into the world, because then he does too. Otherwise, any personal intrusion a privileged narrator makes becomes a mockery: she figures not as a person bringing compassion to suffering and making injustice known, but as an agent of white-wash. That may sound far-fetched, but there are passages where Krog depicts herself resisting or rejecting reality, or even the notion that reality exists. She gives as examples of "truth" a stereotype (that all white women lounge beside swimming pools) and a historical impossibility (that the English language originated in Africa); she thinks the TRC ought to honor as "truth" all the formulations brought before it (15-16). She quotes Barthes claiming that narrative is not for representation (82). She reports erasing a sexist remark from an interview tape but quotes the remark (93). She shows herself admitting to "quilting" many events together, and not just those of her private life. She has, she says in this conversation, just been fictionalizing exchanges in an actual workshop held for TRC reporters (168-70), and she adds that even her apparent revelation of an extra-marital affair she had (196-97) is only a story harvested from eavesdropping; after all, "what gives a story its real character is the need to entertain" (170-71). Her persona snaps to a colleague that if the present government is subverting the TRC, she does not want to hear about it (224). Worst of all, the persona skips a chance for real insight when she turns off her tape recorder ("I don't want to hear it. I don't want to broadcast it") on encountering a group of salt-of-the-earth elderly black women chanting, "Winnie didn't kill alone! . . . Winnie had a mandate from us to kill" (246). What is the point of the scene's invention or inclusion? A standard essayistic or autobiographical method would show the second thoughts, the reasons she tells

her readers what she withheld from her radio listeners; but there is no such growth evident in this text. In the end, she admits to telling “many lies in this book about truth” (281). On the other hand, she reveals what she should not—I am assuming that it is real; if not, it is straightforwardly libelous. She quotes half a page of smarmy Nationalist reverence from a decades-old essay of her mother’s (98), which must be one of the family texts she owns she has “exploited” (281). She switches off her tape recorder on request, to listen to a purely personal confession (drinking to relieve grief) from the two named victims (the daughters of an activist who died in jail from medical neglect)—then quotes the confession verbatim in her book (204). If the advantage of the constant present tense in fragmented scenes is vividness, the disadvantage is the unmitigated freezing of moments of glibness, of cowardice, of betrayal. The narrative can look masochistic.

Moreover, the metatextual play is irritating. It is too self-conscious, too manipulative, and is in woeful taste in connection to a human rights topic; to know what happened is the only solace most of South Africa’s persecuted will ever have, and they would not be amused to learn that a book purportedly about them tries to break down the reader’s confidence in knowing anything. Besides, the average reader will not care that Krog may be lying about lying, or lying and confessing at the same time, but will buy this first mass-market book about the TRC to learn about the TRC, not to endure the worst application yet of forty-year-old literary theories.

This review is going to get me into a lot of trouble in South Africa, unless I give more context. The TRC—along with the locally produced texts on it—has been too little at the service of victims for some persuasive reasons. If all of the perpetrators were exposed, there would be no one left with enough international credibility to govern. (Local credibility, as in the case of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, comes much more easily.) And if all of the victims of apartheid were heard and fully compensated, the hearings would go on for decades and the treasury would be empty; apartheid brutally displaced whole populations. The TRC in the first place was conceived not as an instrument of justice or democracy, let alone of truth or reconciliation, but as a means of

preventing a civil war. From the horse-trading between the ANC and the Nationalist Government, a clause emerged in the interim constitution promising amnesty for crimes “associated with political objectives” (a loose category indeed, as it turned out: the young murderers of American Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl got out of prison after pleading what sounded like some quite *ad hoc* political associations and sympathies; they even said they were acting in support of a teachers’ strike). The government probably could not have changed hands without that guarantee, which has made the running of the commission at bottom pragmatic. A pardon machine would not be an outrageous characterization, but this machine has helped keep the white police and army officers in control (they could have prevented multi-racial elections or done away with the results), and has helped keep the black Government from shutting down the independent courts and press (a postcolonial response almost automatic in other African countries).

Granting this, though, I have trouble avoiding the conclusion that blanket amnesty would have been better. The sale of papal indulgences must have been more dignified than the events that framed the TRC’s hearings. At the start, the need for efficiency made impossible the appointment of commissioners with something challenging to say about reconciliation because of their stubborn commitment to non-violence; a different kind of TRC could certainly have used the Quaker H. W. van der Merwe. (But the most galling missed appointment was of the Anglican priest Michael Lapsley. He lost both his hands to a parcel bomb while he was in exile in Lesotho, yet he returned to South Africa to work at rehabilitating the victims of human rights violations.) The public hearings ended with “testimony” about the old government’s chemical and biological weapons program. An item I will never forget is the assertion that the government needed to be able to warn its operatives not to eat the mints on hotel pillows; this was one of the purposes—all purely defensive—behind the development of poisons and their testing on animals.

Headed by Desmond Tutu, the most famous South African clergyman, touted by the country’s press and credited with the power to bring spiritual renewal and change an entire human

rights culture, the TRC—together with many new institutions in post-apartheid South Africa—succumbed to the hypocrisy and overreach of helpless good intentions. The inevitable disappointments are overwhelming the benefits, provoking new waves of denial and reaction. Krog reflects this in her teasing expository reticence described above—and in her territorial snarling at the foreign press. In a workshop for journalists held before the hearings started, a German gives a thoughtful warning, which Krog quotes: “I think that South Africa is still too traumatized to really look at its past—you are still figuring out whether you have survived it, whether your economy is intact, whether you are going to make it.” As usual, she points and bypasses, almost erasing something cogent. She moves immediately to the assertion that the foreigners at the workshop are interested in nothing but criminal exposure, especially of high-level politicians (14), an accusation her own quotation contradicts, and only the first hostile and undeserved remark about TRC observers from overseas. At best, she is dismissive. A man from the Netherlands, a nameless “citizen of the country my ancestor Johannes Christoffel Krog left in 1776,” pleads with her to take a critical, idealistic look at the TRC, to “focus on what is in it that makes it worthwhile to all of us.” She snuffs him out: “I have nothing to say to his ‘all of us.’” It is unthinkable for her to “deal with the Truth Commission as if from the heart of a different life” (223-24). But to speak “as if from the heart of a different life” is an act of conscience all authors on political topics ought to aim for. Krog can approach a multi-racial matter only as an Afrikaner, not as a human being. We have seen this before in South Africa. She is not an overt racist—far from it—but she does not recognize how small the shift is from Afrikaner-Nationalist-by-birthright to Afrikaner-supporter-of-the-new-regime, nor what a tremendous space for loyalty and conviction lies beyond.

But perhaps she does know, and is simply unwilling to make the journey, having too many possessions to take along. It could be that her agonizing middle position in some matters is evidence of this. To her credit, she did report a number of unpleasant things she had on good evidence—for instance, that an informant had linked one commissioner to a bombing of

civilians, and that that commissioner's second-in-command had been ordered to investigate. (I use the historical past tense for this incident, which must be factual at least in its public manifestations.) This was impeccable reporting, and further justified shortly afterwards, when it appeared that the TRC's official report on the matter had been kept secret, and when the second-in-command resigned (225-26). Though the informant proved to be lying, Krog had a good nose here, as it was not the TRC in a three-month "investigation" but the journalist Pippa Green in a single morning of phone calls who uncovered the lies (234). The TRC had undertaken a cover-up, without even bothering to find out whether there was anything to cover up. But to Krog's discredit, though the vituperation and threats from the TRC following her initial report made her understandably angry, the end of the conflict left her mourning and groveling. In no time, Desmond Tutu forgot the TRC's attack on her so completely that in an interview he blamed her for not investigating further and even withheld "his usual prayer"; astonishingly, she then wrote to him and his deputy Alex Boraine in the language of a wild teenager explaining a religious conversion to her parents and pledging reform, not of a reporter insisting on doing her job: "I am absolutely and very sorry. I never meant to cast doubt on the integrity of either of you. I hope this in some way helps, because I am missing, you both" (236). It is a sympathetic disadvantage that she is stuck between a traditional South African past and the demands of a transforming, international culture, but that consideration loses appeal against the background of other South African writers fighting their way through to insight—to far more, in fact, than any outsider could achieve. J. M. Coetzee is only the most renowned example.

Krog tries to be too much: political insider, journalist, historian, memoir writer, poet. She is gifted in each of these individual roles; the problem is that they come together like bricks with no mortar but jam. I hope she will write more on the TRC, rounding out her work with time. Her contribution even at the moment is significant. There is no voice like hers, from this country like no other.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Krog, Antjie. *Country of My Skull: Guilt and Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. Johannesburg: Random House, 1998. Pp. viii. 286.

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