



My Traitor's Heart: A South African Exile Returns to Face His Country, His Tribe, and His Conscience

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A classic of literary nonfiction, *My Traitor's Heart* has been acclaimed as a masterpiece by readers around the world. Rian Malan is an Afrikaner, scion of a centuries-old clan and relative of the architect of apartheid, who fled South Africa after coming face-to-face with the atrocities and terrors of an undeclared civil war between the races. This book is the searing account of his return after eight years of uneasy exile. Armed with new insight and clarity, Malan explores apartheid's legacy of hatred and suffering, bearing witness to the extensive physical and emotional damage it has caused to generations of South Africans on both sides of the color line. Plumbing the darkest recesses of the white and black South African psyches, Malan ultimately finds his way toward the light of redemption and healing. *My Traitor's Heart* is an astonishing book -- beautiful, horrifying, profound, and impossible to put down.

My Traitor's Heart: A South African Exile Returns to Face His Country, His Tribe, and His Conscience Details

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Matt says

This, Don't Let's Go To the Dogs Tonight, When a Crocodile Eats the Sun, and Cutting for Stone all shed light on the post-colonial ex-pat experience in central southern Africa, and come at it different ways. Malan's book is pretty haunting and definitely deserves to head the list. These are a definite post-modern twist on Out of Africa and along with non-fiction like Blood River and King Leopold's Ghost I think give pretty good insight into what's happened over the past 40 years in central Africa. If you're interested in the area, Zimbabwean politics, or the expat experience these a definite should read.

David Wurzburg says

I LOVE THIS BOOK; a narrative non-fiction about the racial/social/political contradictions of "post" Apartheid South Africa.

written by a very uniquely historically-placed Afrikaner who is always at struggle with his place in the system.

one of my favorites, especially because it was recommended to me by my grandfather, who also loved it.

Tim says

An absolutely unforgettable book. Favourite quote: "Beyond politics, there was mythology, and rival myths to live and die by: for some whites, the myth of white supremacy, and for others, the myth of brave and noble Africans in heroic struggle against unspeakable evil. If you were white, you had to embrace one of those two myths, and let it guide your way. If you believed in neither, the paradox fractured your skull and buried its poisonous claws in your brain."

By the way, he's also a great singer/songwriter. I've been to several of his shows.

Alisa says

I was reading this book in Philz Coffee in San Francisco and I had to close the book and take some deep breaths to keep from crying in a public place. It's a memoir in a way, but mostly a collection of true stories of the way that people killed each other in South Africa, particularly in the 1980s in the dying throes of apartheid, but also how that hate and those killings were part of a system of hate and killings between races since the 1600s.

This book struck a powerful chord with me. It is almost unbearably honest. It reveals the author's painful (sometimes racist!) thoughts about race, and the painful truth of the difficulty of achieving true racial peace

in South Africa. The themes are universal. I think you should probably read this immediately.

Richard says

In the final pages of this book, author Rian Malan "confesses" that the book didn't turn out to be what he originally intended, and I can see where he's coming from. It appears at the beginning to be a personal account of his experiences with, and feelings about, apartheid. But Malan is a journalist, and he ends up, as journalists do, talking with various people and relating their experiences. And that, I think, made it a better book than it would have been otherwise. Malan is unflinching; yes, we know that white people did awful things to blacks in South Africa during those years, and many examples are described. But in return, there were many bad things done *to* whites as well, and we read about them too. A powerful, emotional book about an ugly time in recent history.

This was the ninth of a projected 19 consecutive Africa-related books I plan to read, and the first that focuses on South Africa and apartheid. (There are more to come.) This was a good introduction to the subject. In fact, I suspect if it were to be the only apartheid book I was to read, it would have been a good choice. Maybe there will be a better apartheid book coming up, but the first one has set the bar rather high.

Joel says

It's hard to "like" a book that focuses on something as atrocious as apartheid, but I found My Traitor's Heart enlightening while I was living in South Africa. Rian was an Afrikaner disillusioned by his own race and family, as they supported (or at least did not resist) severe racism. Rian rebelled to some extent but mostly seemed to feel paralyzation in the face of dangerous options. Standing against his people made him their enemy, but marching with the oppressed was equally perilous, as both sides distrusted those outside the mold. Rian's challenges will never compare to the harrowing experiences of black South Africans, but it was still interesting to see Apartheid from his kind but troubled Afrikaner heart.

Joe says

Wow. I can honestly say I've never read a book like this one.

The book begins, apparently, with the intent of the author (a white South African writing in the late 80's) to trace his family through South African history to its the earliest events. The author, a self-confessed white liberal who detests apartheid, writes of his famous ancestors with a deeply critical eye.

However, as the book progresses the author uncovers mysterious, unresolvable contradictions in the lives of his ancestors and finds them in his own life as well. He flees South Africa's agonizing paradoxes and lives in Los Angeles for about 8 years before his conscience forces him to come home. And South Africa, he realizes, truly is his home, a truth he wrestles with endlessly.

Each page brings a new perplexing observation and each chapter reveals some unbelievable new layer of apartheid's relentless horror. Rian uncovers an apartheid more horrifying even than one might expect, but it is a horror that cannot be easily understood. The book ends with a dark beauty but leaves more unresolved than resolved.

Susan Hirtz says

Well written, feelingly described yet heart-rending reflection on Mr. Malan's experiences growing up, incorporating both the bloody past and present of South Africa. This is a great feat of journalism and spiritual honesty; one that needs to be on everyone's reading list.

Rian Malan is the son and grandson of the architects of South Africa's apartheid policy; men whose names were political mainstays of the Afrikaner political hierarchy and national mythology. Growing up in South Africa as their privileged heir, he came to despise those views and emigrated as a young man; later returning out of loyalty to his native land, imbued with an openness inspired by US black consciousness leaders in the 1970s and 1980s and filled with hope for a multiracial, multitribal future

As he relates, his perspective revealed itself as simplistic after years of work. Tribalism, fear, violence, crime, ignorance and the culture of poverty were entrenched; impossible to overcome, the heritage of apartheid was an enormous wall paralyzing political leaders and citizens. Even moderate or liberal South Africans still find it difficult to transcend these issues. Civil upheaval has become part of the culture. People act, the government reacts; it is a constant cycle. Hence, positive 21st century common outcomes are the work of future generations.

While in some ways a "coming of age" tale, this is also a riveting first person account of actual events as experienced in the thunderous growth of late 20th century South Africa. It is descriptive of the national impotence felt when the country was unable to truly unite even after a "peaceful" revolution. One is left with a real empathy for the people and land whose hopes were dashed by its own internal strife.

Their problems and violence on a higher level also reflect an endemic ongoing US racism, something many Americans refuse to confront. As one South African said to me recently, "as least we're honest about it."

A disturbing book in many ways, My Traitor's Heart is one whose sequel can be constantly seen in today's headlines.

Petra X says

At its heart this book has the problem, what to do when you utterly despise your racist father who advocates violence as a solution when you love him terribly, terribly much?

It isn't a solveable dilemma. Rian, who despite his upbringing, isn't at all racist, leaves the country so he won't have to face it on a day-to-day-basis, but eventually returns to his homeland, because it is his home, and learns to live with the discordance in his heart.

Some reviewers have seen it as a book about the end-times of apartheid, others as the views of the liberal son versus the hardliner father, full of anecdotes of ignorance, violence and hatred - from both sides. But it isn't really, or not to me. It is Rian Malan personal memoir packed with current affairs but really about the dissonance in his heart.

How could any of us come to grips with a father we despised for his responsibility for murders he justified in ways that were evil to us, and yet we loved him as a child loves a father?

I read this years ago, it will forever be fresh in my mind.

Gugu says

We read this book in my book club and it was by far the most free-flowing, heated and emotionally charged session.

How could it not be, seeing as it tackles the issues and history so close to home. We could all imagine our parents and grandparents experiences the atrocities that occurred during Apartheid. This book is very relevant for South Africa today and reveals all the things that have lead us to the precarious place we are in.

Some of the content is difficult to stomach, but it is written very well. It is a brave book.

Helen (Helena/Nell) says

I think this is an essential book. Essential, I mean, for any human being who tries to understand the human condition—what we are, what we may be. Not that this is ever comprehensible but . . .

I don't know how to begin this review.

In the front of the book, which my son gave me, he has written in his small backwards sloping hand: "This book is messed up and I think you will find it fascinating. A real example of someone telling a story because it's the only way something can be said."

He was right. It is fascinating and it is all over the place. It is actually many stories and one story, and I'm not sure where it ends up. It is mythic and impersonal and very personal. Malan tells the story of his family, "the white tribe of Africa, arrogant, xenophobic, and 'full of blood', as the Zulus say of tyrants. They had their own language, their own customs and traditions, and a myth to light their way, a mystic Christian mission on the Dark Continent. They spoke of themselves as bearers of the light, but in truth they were dark of heart, and they knew it and willed it so."

Nineteenth century Afrikaners rejected the European Enlightenment, says, Malan, and they did it consciously. They called themselves 'Doppers', after the little metal caps that snuffed out candles – the candles that symbolized the light of reason.

But what he goes on to relate is more frightening than that because this is not a history about something that's over. This is now. "I am a white man born in Africa," says Malan, "and all else flows from there."

Perhaps all else DOES flow from there, not just for Malan. I don't think this remarkable book is just about South Africa. I think it is about us all, and what it says offers scant comfort, although the end talks about love, in such a way that 'love' and 'sheer dogged persistence' seem remarkably similar. We do such terrible things. Especially young men do awful things, but I gave birth to one of these and he gave me this book.

Sometimes I read thrillers, in which violence happens. I read them for pleasure. We call this escapism. Moral certainties get reinforced because bad guys do bad things: rape, violence, torture. In this book the violence is real and the bad guys aren't bad. They are just doing what human beings do: wiping out other human beings, crushing in them whatever they find despicable (I want to add 'in themselves' but perhaps that is just amateur psychiatry). The human beings being crushed may be men or women or children. It makes no odds.

It has happened for millennia and, needless to say, it continues to happen.

What age of enlightenment? What belief that this is all in the past? It is not in the past. It is in *us*.

I don't know if I understand the book or whether it understands itself. I probably need to start reading it all over again. "Beyond politics, there was mythology, and rival myths to live and die by: for some whites, the myth of white supremacy, and for others, the myth of brave and noble Africans in heroic struggle against unspeakable evil. If you were white, you had to embrace one of those two myths, and let it guide your way. If you believed in neither, the paradox fractured your skull and buried its poisonous claws in your brain."

But this book believes in neither. The end is not horrible, but I don't know what it is. It is hopeful, but in the face of much that is not, and I wasn't sure I quite dared to believe in it.

I felt curiously aware of the land, the geography. I had a sense of the impervious beauty of this strange country, which I have read about but never visited, and do not expect to visit. I am a small white woman but I am part of this history; I am a human being, and if we are to believe what we are told, even my Celtic genes have a distant relationship with that faraway continent. So what are we human beings? Why are our hearts so dark and so violent? How can we ever live with ourselves?

D says

Well then. I did enjoy reading this book until about three-quarters of the way through, where the heaviness of the crimes made me need to pace myself. It's well-written and engaging, though often it seems like the chapters were left with a bit of a cliffhanger, never to be picked up on later.

In fact, the whole book seems a bit short on resolution, and I get that that's the whole point. Or rather, I get that not being able to tie things up neatly at the end and letting things go mostly unspoken is the point.

But first, here's what I value in the book. The cataloging of events, crime, tensions, anecdotes. His conclusion I'm not so sure of, but there is a lot to sort through and it definitely stops you in your tracks. So the impact of the book is rock solid. It's all very voyeuristic.

But here's the problem: I draw different conclusions from the book than Malan does. Best I can tell by decoding the unstated/barely stated, is that Malan is resigning himself to the same tribalism that abhors him. He knows the positions of whites in South Africa is that of oppressor, and yet his conclusion is that his only choice is to, what, embrace that? To me, it's very clear that whites are not going to be able to make it work in South Africa. Now I'm not saying the only solution is for them to leave, but that wasn't even mentioned as a general solution, only as a solution for individuals.

His determination to stay in the land of his ancestors is hypocritical and laughable, and while I see where he's coming from, it's a losing battle. They're invaders and settlers and yet they feel entitled to stay? Figure that one out. As for the tragedies he sees at the hands of blacks, well what does he expect? For me, Malan serves to strengthen my anti-apartheid views. It's true, a liberal solution won't work, I would've agreed with that from the beginning. But while he documents what blacks are often driven to, he just as often switches it around and says 'my god, they're monsters'. Well duh! Monstrosity as a product of the last few hundred years of South African history? Fancy that!

So while I can clearly see that atrocity was becoming the norm for him, why on earth he'd let himself

become a white apologist is depressing. If he truly thinks Africa is dark and brutal, and that there's no way blacks and whites can live in peace, then clearly a radical solution is in order, not the status quo.

But I'm giving this book 4 stars. It's well written, impactful, eye-opening, and educational. I read the entire book before confirming a small suspicion I had that there was no real surprise philosophical insight at the end. It's not like the book is poisoning from the start. It's actually mostly ambiguous, in that you're not really sure which way the author is going to go in the end, and so I could still recommend it to my friends, and probably would prefer not to spoil it for them first.

P.S. - I just realized Malan's conclusion might be the same as any liberal's, given the determination and thoughtfulness that he held. Alas, liberalism is too contradictory to hold up to the light - it's racism is deep and sometimes subtle, but rest assured - it's there.

Wren says

Reading this in two days was a bad decision for a few reasons: 1) I didn't get to really love it the way I should have and 2) It's just so devastating that a person should not ingest that much tragedy in that short a time. This is a beautifully written, brutally honest account of a white man's wrestling with issues of conscience and identity in apartheid South Africa that I would recommend to anyone that's interested in the topic (I'm looking at you, human race). It's one of the worst marks on contemporary history's record and we should all be aware of it; Malan does a wonderful job of explaining the unbelievably complexities of colonialism, violence, anger, and recovery while still being a fantastic writer. This is not a combination I see often. I think what I loved most was that I walked away with more questions and I didn't feel like he tried to disingenuously tie up loose ends when it's a conflict the world will be reeling from for generations.

I definitely recommend it but if you don't handle violence well, perhaps this isn't the book for you as there are many horrific accounts of brutality.

Doreen Petersen says

There's really nothing to say about this book. I think my rating says it all.

Emma says

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy the book, quite the contrary. I really enjoyed the beginning and found his physical, mental, archeological and anthropological journey a hard read but not due to the writing, due to its truth. It started out as a history of his ancestors then changed to a more journalistic view about other inhabitants and sufferers/survivors of apartheid and the tapestry that is South Africa. Whilst it was a little long for me and I have to admit to skim reading the last half, I found his writing, his truths and honesty very admirable and it felt like he laid his soul out for all of us to judge, admire, dislike or just learn from.

Moushine Zahr says

This book, written by a white Boer South African journalist specialized on crime, is a non-fiction novel divided in 3 parts:

- the first part is about the author's family, the Malan family, which had been in South Africa for 3 centuries. The author describes how many of his ancestors had racist views/relationships and behaviors against the native black south African while the author believes he is totally different from them, but not too different. Through the text, the readers can feel how the author is confused and hesitant about the situation in South Africa.

- in the second part of the novel, after the return of the author from self-imposed exile, during the second half of the 1980's, he wrote extensively about the too many violent crimes committed in South Africa: Boer white against Black natives, White boss against black employees, black natives against black natives... These chapters were to me like very long news articles on crime which maybe (I suppose) weren't published at the time for various reasons: length, lack of interest, content too violent,...

- the third and last part is about his journey into Zulu Land, where 10% of 'bad' land were given to 90% of local natives to live on, home to poverty, misery, and violence. He wrote in this part about a couple of white people who chose freely to live with the local natives like them and to work with them to improve the agriculture in those poor land.

Each of these 3 parts are distinct one from the other; therefore, it can be read separately and in any chronology.

You, the reader, must have the heart and stomach to be able to read the entire novel because this novel contains the most number of crime scenes and the most violent crimes I've ever read in any other novel. The first part is the least interesting as the author wrote about his ancient family and himself. It is good to read it to have some notion about the history of South Africa prior to the 20th century. The author did a great job in writing in detailing at length forgetting nothing, holding nothing and omitting nothing for the reader who can read these violent crimes as if he/she were an eye witness standing nearby while the crime is happening live. In addition, the author mentions his state of mind while searching for the truth and observing the state in which his country is in.

This is a great book to read because not only it describes extensively how was South Africa during the Apartheid era, but the novel also gives the readers a lot to think about on many subjects common to all countries.

Josh Friedlander says

Growing up as a white South African, my upbringing was quite similar to Rian Malan's. There was one crucial distinction: I lived in the "free", post-apartheid South Africa, where the miracle of democracy had given everyone the right to vote, live where they pleased, and earn a living wage. Everyone was relieved that we had gotten rid of our great moral burden, and we could finally just be a remote, peaceful nation, welcoming tourists to our wine routes and game reserves.

Except that things still weren't quite right. Segregation still existed, in a more informal sense - the wealthy Johannesburg suburbs in which I lived were almost all white, sprinkled with a few black families who'd been blessed with the right connections for government jobs or lucrative contracts. Almost all of the black people I interacted with were menial workers. And there were other sides to this country with which I was

completely unacquainted. Poor white farmers, blighted housing projects, all-black "squatter camps" (or informal settlements). Having left South Africa more than six years ago, I'm only now realising how little I ever knew it.

That's why reading this book felt so important. Rian Malan was a classic liberal, who flirted with Communism in his teens and fled to the US to avoid conscription. He intended to write a boilerplate book about the evils of apartheid, but in doing so he encountered the multivalent nature of Africa which has perplexed outsiders for centuries.

He begins with the arrival of his ancestor Dawie Malan (a chain of Malans runs through the key moments of South African history) and his flight across the Great Fish River. Throughout the book he wonders, how did we come to a situation of such hatred and fear? When the first humans left Africa and wandered off to Nordic climes, what changed in them? And when they finally returned, what caused their meeting with their long-lost brethren to be one of fear and violence? Malan repeatedly interrogates the concepts of race, peoplehood and tolerance. Africa scrambles the preconceptions of justice and fairness he imbibed with his Eurocentric education. At one point he declares "the Enlightenment cannot penetrate here, in darkest Africa".

Malan describes all manners of violence: white on black, black on white, black on black. He is driven to despair by the insensate nature of the conflict he witnesses. One section of the book describes a series of grisly murders, followed by a description of the trial and final statement of the murderer, which indicts white South Africa for the cruelty and humiliation it heaped upon the man, driving him to become a murderer. And then it goes back to the man's community and calls his account into question, portraying him as the child of an incestuous relationship, spurned by his tribe, with possible mental health issues.

South Africa resists easy explanations, or any explanations at all. That explains the circuitous nature of this book (and perhaps this review). Malan is unable to put a handle on everything he has seen. The violence, the sickness of his society draws him back from exile, but appears insoluble (this book was published in 1990, four years before the first democratic elections). Even now, though things are exponentially better, there are overwhelming problems of integration and protection of minorities. This is a country that will never stop breaking your heart.

The final chapter of this book encapsulates perfectly its overall theme. It tells of Neil Alcock, a white farmer who dedicated his life to living in a drought-stricken Zulu reservation, helping develop sustainable farming systems and mediating with heartless white authorities. He spoke Zulu like a native and lived in a white hut with his wife, two biological sons, and several adopted black children. Malan chronicles, sometimes dispassionately but more often with great sorrow, Alcock's attempt to intervene in one of the constant internecine conflicts, and his resulting death. His widow is eventually robbed, beaten and threatened with death by a man she raised as her son. Droughts are followed by floods, goats trespass on the farm and destroy it, and finally even eat the flower garden she has planted on her husband's grave.

Yet from this heart-wrenching, infuriating story, Malan wrenches (maybe a little too easily, maybe to placate a nervous editor, who needed a strong ending - but still with great skill) a tiny piece of redemption. In an early morning ceremony, two men return to gather Neil Alcock's soul, and return it to his home. The villagers create a joyous ceremony out of this return, feasting and dancing, until even the widow joins in. And finally, something real and unprecedented has happened - documented in a paragraph of tremendous, shocking power.

In the end, the sun went down and the celebrants went home, leaving the horns of the sacrificial cattle nailed to the room of the home. The horns were a reminder of the ceremony performed that day, a sign that the household within had honored its shades. In a continent where people worship their ancestors, Neil Alcock had become a god - the first white god in Africa, as far as

anybody knows. Aeons after our ancestors walked away, the first white man had come home to Africa to stay.

Margitte says

A shocking synopsis of a turbulent time in South African history, very well written and an honest account of the white psyche, both liberal and conservative, when the last bastion of colonialism crashed down amidst international sanctions which was the only way to bring the most powerful government down. The former government could not be beaten in any type of war effort from the outside.

Malan, however, demonstrates how these actual events were withheld by way of a moratorium on the press from the white Afrikaners, especially, and the sad results when the information(including some of the events in the book) finally burst upon them in 1990 when F.W. De Klerk lifted the ban.

The book was not welcome at the time of its publication,1991, since the overwhelming shock of an information overload post the lifting of the ban,still reverberated around the South African landscape.

Being a journalist, Malan used his skills to highlight only the shocking events for optimum effect and to speak with his new master's voice and write what the world wanted to hear, not what was the actual truth. The book lacks some critical information to explain to the non-South African reader why Apartheid was deemed the perfect solution for those who defended it, and perhaps why some older black residents mourn its demise, claiming they were a lot better off then, and the rage is now directed at the black government who destroyed all the services and infrastructure left by the Apartheid government without replacing it with new or improved ones.

He also excluded the real international agenda behind the efforts to overthrow the government - which might be due to his lack of real insight in the complete situation and which leave the reader with only a subjective, inexperienced, sadly limited recall of events. The book could have been so much more if he had the guts to include the puppet masters from outside South Africa, in the USA, Brittan, China and Russia competed ferociously for control over the wealth of minerals and who needed to install a new government who could dance to the puppet strings of those neo-colonial control by way of big corporates.

It is not explained in this book why the people of Africa is now controlled by black governments(who are much more eager to be bought), but the minerals beneath it soil is tightly controlled from the outside. The white government of South Africa was aware of this. They not only had to fight the black uprisings but also the big international business behind it who pulled those puppet strings.

Being confronted with information which was banned from publication for many years,was not easy for those people despising Malan's candor. Yet it was necessary to finally bring understanding, even compassion, to the people of South Africa to fully understand their own, complete, history.

Typical Afrikaner, Malan is not afraid to be honest and stick to his limited insight into the events, even expressing the fear he felt, the sorrow, the doubt in himself. Not many South African authors are willing to follow in his footsteps.

With his follow-up reports, newspaper articles and books, he remains the straightforward sharpshooter on the South African politics. **As long as he keeps to the real facts, his work will remain relevant.**

The book is a violent read, stirring up strong emotions. The reader should have a strong constitution for it.

Orsodimondo says

COME SI COMBATTE L'APARTHEID SE QUELLI PER CUI LO FAI TI VOGLIONO MORTO PERCHÉ SEI BIANCO?

Ci sono alcuni giornalisti che, dal momento che sono costretti a contare le parole per fare entrare i loro articoli in spazi precisi, quando hanno un libro sotto le mani, perdono qualsiasi controllo e ritegno (un altro esempio è "Quando un coccodrillo mangia il sole" del giornalista Peter Godwin).

Riaan Malan sbrodola gli stessi concetti una, due, tre e più volte - si ripete, affastella storie, di ognuna racconta l'antefatto e descrive tutti i personaggi, con l'ovvio effetto di annacquare il racconto, di perdere in incisività.

Voto sulla sintesi: 0.

Voto sull'analisi molto alto invece.
E sull'originalità del suo punto di vista.
E sulla qualità del suo racconto.
E sull'interesse che il racconto suscita.

Ma 413 pagine sono davvero troppe: paradossalmente, se l'avesse raccontato a qualcuno in grado di scrivere come si deve, il libro avrebbe potuto essere una bomba.

Così, ci sono 100 pagine che si potrebbero togliere senza fatica.

E probabilmente qualche altra potrebbe venir via, con maggior fatica, ma senza conseguenze negative sull'opera. Anzi.

Michael says

Having lived in SA from 1976 to 1999, I lived through it all. Riaan Malan captures the Afrikaner psyche and it's a must read for anyone who wants to know more about that complex and beautiful country - highly

highly recommended
