



A Rainbow in the Night: The Tumultuous Birth of South Africa

Dominique Lapierre

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In 1652 a small group of Dutch farmers landed on the southernmost tip of Africa. Sent by the powerful Dutch India Company, their mission was simply to grow vegetables and supply ships rounding the cape. The colonists, however, were convinced by their strict Calvinist faith that they were among God's "Elect," chosen to rule over the continent. Their saga—bloody, ferocious, and fervent—would culminate three centuries later in one of the greatest tragedies of history: the establishment of a racist regime in which a white minority would subjugate and victimize millions of blacks. Called *apartheid*, it was a poisonous system that would only end with the liberation from prison of one of the moral giants of our time, Nelson Mandela. *A Rainbow in the Night* is Dominique Lapierre's epic account of South Africa's tragic history and the heroic men and women—famous and obscure, white and black, European and African—who have, with their blood and tears, brought to life the country that is today known as the Rainbow Nation.

A Rainbow in the Night: The Tumultuous Birth of South Africa Details

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Author : Dominique Lapierre

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Fausto Betances says

Takeaways

1795 - British galleons appear for the first time. They conquered the Cape Town to prevent it from falling on French hands. They abolished slavery and annihilated afrikaners by issuing laws that considered equal rights for all. Including blacks, natives

1852 - the British crown recognizes the independence of the city/nation of Pretoria (afrikaners)

1912 - afrikaners win the elections and quickly pass the "native land act" dividing the nation into areas allocated to blacks and areas allocated to whites. There were 12 times more blacks than white however they only received percent of the land. Blacks were prohibited from acquiring land beyond their allocation which didn't include the gold and diamond mine areas.

1912 - African National Congress (ANC) was founded

1918 - Brøderbund was founded

1922 - urban area act - black ghettos (called townships) were created close to the industrial heartland to provide labor to the white opened businesses

1938(?) - 4 million whites vs 24 million blacks by the time apartheid was conceived

Education:

1385 grand a year per white pupil

593 colored

192 in black child

1963 - The Rivonia Trial took place in South Africa between 9 October 1963 and 12 June 1964. The Rivonia Trial led to the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and the others among the accused who were convicted of sabotage and sentenced to life at the Palace of Justice, Pretoria.

Laurabrannen says

Should be required reading for every citizen of the world. A reminder that educated people and the governments they lead can do horrific things, and it's important to voice what's right. that global pressure can in fact make change. It was only yesterday afterall. And... Mandela was an amazing human being, as are every individual that raised the arm and fist.

Apratim Mukherjee says

Basically this is a history book where history of South Africa has been narrated in a very interesting way (from the Dutch conquest in 1652 to elections in 1994).Some points have been omitted like Namibia's independence and end of sporting boycott in1991(so I deducted one star).But all in all,Dominique Lapierre provides an interesting way to learn history.I think it is must read for those interested in history of apartheid.

Bruce says

Former *Paris Match* reporter and philanthropist Lapierre writes a passionate and lively history of South Africa from the landing of the Dutch East India Company's small group of lettuce farmers under the direction of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 to the election of Nelson Mandela as the first black president of a multi-racial country in 1994. The emphasis is on the twentieth century, what happened after the Great Trek of the Afrikaners into the interior and their bloody battles with the British, the Zulus, and the other native inhabitants. It tells of the foundation of the Nationalist Party, and an inner group of them, the *Broederbond*, inspired and taught by the Nazis in Hitler's Germany, gained control of the government in 1948 and immediately started its harsh form of segregation called *apartheid* separating the races with no pretense of equality. Lapierre recounts the struggle against this regime interspersed with the stories of Nelson Mandela and those of Christiaan Barnard and Helen Lieberman two upper class whites who ignored the legal restrictions of *apartheid* by actively working to aid their fellow black and colored residents of South Africa. The history is by no means impartial, Lapierre communicates his own points of view throughout the text. He does not spare the exclamation points! This however, just enlivens his text.

Elliot Ratzman says

This is an accessible history of South Africa written by a well-known French journalist. The history is more complex than I thought. I found myself sympathetic to the Dutch traders and farmers in the 17th and 18th centuries sought their fortune—and a quasi-religious calling—to settle what seemed to be a largely unpopulated region of southern Africa. After centuries of harrowing battles with Zulus, the British, other Dutchmen and natural disasters, these “Afrikaner” country bumpkins trek around this area bringing their own racialized Calvinism as an ideological shield. Asserting they are the true “South Africans” these scary bullies perceive the British, Asians, Indians, and certainly blacks, as interlopers and aliens. By 1948, after training in Nazi Germany, the white leaders create a totalitarian police state based on the Bible, white supremacy and a laughable, cruel race science. This is not the only book you should read about South Africa but it will serve as a compelling overview.

Horacio Mejía Rodríguez says

El más grande ejemplo mundial de un acuerdo de paz. Ellos pudieron perdonar a millones de blancos tras siglos de opresión. En otros lugares no perdonamos a miles.

Mark says

A "hit the high points" overview of South African history with particular focus on apartheid & Nelson Mandela. The scope of the book is limited... but it was still riveting to read.

I would be interested in hearing another perspective on the role of the Protestant church and Reformed theology in both the development & dismantling of apartheid... the author has a bit of an ax to grind when it comes to the Christian faith.

Heather Daugherty says

I really enjoyed reading this book - I realized as I started that I knew nothing about the history of South Africa. The book was frightening and appalling, realizing the ways that humans can treat one another. As I prepare to take a group of students to South Africa this summer, I think that what I read in this book will prepare both them and me for what we will see and experience.

Reading this book with the Civil Rights Movement in the back of my head, I realized what horrible ways blacks have been treated, and it makes me want to do more to stand up for the rights of all people in our country today.

Bonnie says

In anticipation of a trip to South Africa, I wanted a readable history of the country and apartheid. Lapierre starts with the 1652 arrival of Dutch farmers - sent to the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch East India Company. The sole purpose was to grow vegetables (preventing scurvy) for their supply ships rounding the Cape. These settlers, driven by their strong Calvinistic faith believed that their goal was more than farming: they believed that they were God's chosen people to settle and rule the continent. After 3 centuries of wars - over sovereignty, native tribes, foreign gold and diamond seekers, and the British army, the resulting regime created an apartheid nation. A white minority subjugated and victimized millions of blacks.

Lapierre ends his historical retelling with the election of Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa in 1994. While there were many good/bad guys on both sides of the struggle against apartheid, Lapierre mentions only a few - names easily recognizable by most with any knowledge of South African history. He may not be telling the entire story, but as an introduction to the country's history - it is a very readable book. Appendices can lead interested readers to more in-depth books on the people involved in the introduction and to the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Sajith Kumar says

There was a time when I chanced upon the Indian passport of one of my uncles lying on the table. I was a student then and I opened the little black book with curiosity. There was an epistle from the President of India appealing to persons anywhere in the world to extend wholehearted help and cooperation to my uncle whose photo was pasted on the facing side. On the next page however, a curiosity awaited me. A seal in indelible blue ink proclaimed that the passport is valid for travel to any country except the Republic of South Africa. I was intrigued. Why a country is singled out like this? What would happen if my uncle happens to land at the border post of South Africa while on his journey and which is to be traversed to reach his designation? Then began my enquiry on why this country on the southern tip of Africa is discriminated against by the international community. I heard the term 'apartheid' for the first time. Dominique Lapierre, who needs no introduction, has told the story of how South Africa was born and the inhuman racial segregation made deep scars on its social life. South Africa's history is invariably linked to that of Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president of the country, but had to spend 27 years of his life in a

white prison. In an inimitable style Lapierre begins his story in 1652 when a group of Dutchmen landed at the Cape of Good Hope with an assignment from the Dutch East India Company – to plant lettuce and other vegetables in the Cape and to sell it to sailors who rounded it on their journey to India and the Spice Islands in an effort to rid them of the curse of scurvy, the disease caused by deficiency of fruits on a sailor's diet. The book ends with Mandela assuming power after its first multi-racial elections. The book is a page turner like the author's all the other titles.

Part One of the book covers the period of three centuries between the Dutch men Jan Van Riebeeck setting foot on the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 and the ascendancy of the National Party to power in 1948. The whites were few in number as compared to blacks who were the original inhabitants of the country but divided into prominent tribes like the Zulu, Xhosa, and Khoikhoi. The Dutch men were adherents of Calvinism and had escaped from their motherland to evade Catholic persecution. They established the Dutch Reformed Church in their new piece of land. Deeply religious and regular church goers, the Boers, as they were called, were diehard racists who believed in the supremacy of the white race over all others. Taking theological justification for the practice of slavery from the Bible, the Boers strictly separated the races with the blacks and the coloured people treated as sub-humans. Much to the chagrin of them, the British landed in the country in 1795 to outsmart the post-revolutionary French forces. Then started a century long game of hide and seek between the old and new settlers. The Boers called themselves Afrikaners and heroically established rich provinces like Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The land was rich in coal, diamond and gold – a deadly combination. The British slowly annexed territories that were developed by Afrikaners. The frequent migrations generated a spirit of fellowship. A new language, Afrikaans was developed and jealously guarded as the medium of cultural identity of the original settlers. The Boer war (1899-1902) saw much bloodshed, but the British wiped off Boer resistance and assumed overlordship for the whole of South Africa. The Whites then organized political movements that drew inspiration from Hitler's Germany. Finally they won power in 1948 by a narrow margin. Only 20% of the country's inhabitants were whites, the only people who could vote. The National Party won a little over half of these white votes. Thus, with a vote share of slightly above 10%, the party changed the laws and constitution by making South Africa subscribe to apartheid. A similar electoral outcome was that of the Soviet Union, where the communist's vote share was less than 20% but could hijack the country to a miserable destiny till they were kicked out in the 1990s.

Lapierre explains the period between the promulgation of apartheid in 1948 to the beginning of 1980s when cracks were observed in the regime's armor in the next two parts. African National Congress (ANC) and its leader Nelson Mandela parted ways with peaceful protest and slowly degenerated into violent ways. This immensely helped the authoritarian govt which had the southern hemisphere's most efficient police force at its disposal. Mandela and his associates were taken into custody at Rivonia for their alleged plot against the government. In a bout of good luck, they were not sent to gallows, but were awarded imprisonment for life in 1964. Mandela spent the next 27 years of his life in the maximum security prison at Robben Island off the Cape of Good Hope in a somewhat similar predicament as the protagonist in the classic fiction, "Count of Monte Cristo". Meanwhile South Africa's dignity and prestige had been lost in international fora. The state had become a pariah, with many countries severing diplomatic problems with it. Its business reeled under crippling sanctions and boycotts. The Afrikaner movement relented little by little until it was no longer possible to keep Mandela in prison. He was released in 1991. But the leader's release from prison also saw the parting of ways with his wife Winnie after she was accused of murder and infidelity.

The book includes narratives of two prominent whites who defied apartheid to practice what they deemed right in their hearts. Dr. Christiaan Barnard performed the world's first heart transplant. This illustrates the state of advance South Africa's medical system had reached in spite of racial segregation. Helen Libermann was a speech therapist who transformed herself into a social worker with the mission to emancipate black neighborhoods from the chronic problems like illiteracy, health, hygiene and empowerment of women.

These are noble examples of white people rising above the level of intolerance and hatred towards the Blacks, Coloured and Indians. Lapierre presents these cases in a bid to balance the story to its proper point. Otherwise the readers would have reached the outrageous conclusion that all whites in South Africa were united in their brutal suppression of the natives, who are the original inhabitants of the country. But this detour takes some interest out of the main narrative.

One of the many interesting finds is the credibility of the claim put forward by Afrikaners on the country of South Africa. The Boers made the country as it stands today by the sheer dint of their hard work. Even though corrupted with religious ideas that pampered them as God's chosen people, a lot of blood was spilt by the whites as well in erecting the foundation of a modern state. They made a paradise of the semi arid wilderness. Having accumulated the combined effort of ten generations on the land, and seeing it all go to others is a miserable experience. But the draconian laws they put in place that effectually treated blacks like animals prevent humanists from extending sympathy to the Afrikaners. Another point to note is the failure of ANC to develop peaceful methods of protest, which they learned from the work of Mahatma Gandhi in the country during early in his career. They very soon lost confidence in those practices and turned violent.

The book is recommended.

Bethany says

This book gave an engaging overview of the history of South Africa. I had only read two textbook paragraphs on the country before reading this book and found it to be a very readable introduction to a terrible chapter of our world's history. Quite a depressing read that ends on a good note.

For someone unfamiliar with the country's history, the author left many questions unanswered. In the modern portion of the book, M. Lapierre covers the political activity of the country, and then shares vignettes from Nelson Mandela, Helen Lieberman (a concerned white citizen who is brave enough to venture into a black township), and Christian Barnard (performs the first successful heart transplant). Lieberman and Barnard's stories are presented as two of the brightest points in the country's history, doing much to bring down apartheid. But Lapierre doesn't give us a good picture of what was happening in the rest of the country. Were there any other do gooders fighting peacefully against apartheid? Did South Africa make any other great scientific contributions to the world?

The first section of the book covers the first Dutch settlers to South Africa; one quarter of the book covering 300 years of history. This story was very engaging but I also would have liked more details. And I was shocked by the presentation of Dutch Calvinism that resulted in their conquest of South Africa; I suspect that the author is oversimplifying the Voortrekker beliefs and quoting statements that moved the story along, while not logically making much sense. I would have liked more details about how the Dutch started thinking that they were the "chosen people" and started applying verses meant for the Israelites to themselves.

MinG says

I don't know how to explain this book in a word. To be honest, I didn't know what to feel when I was reading

this book. I can't believe this really happened in our history. This just seemed so surreal to me and I didn't want to believe this. Moreover, there were people that wanted to change this world to become better. There was Nelson Mandela. He didn't give up to find freedom for the people in South Africa. Even if he was put in jail, he stayed positive. I looked at myself, and I realised that I was complaining about things that didn't matter at all compare to what he had faced while living his life. What is it that I am doing for humanity? What can I do for the better future? : these are what I questioned myself.

Pie Resting-Place says

Mostly apartheid, not much detail of before then. Nearly nothing about the twenty years since.

Ganesh says

A poignant, very well written history of South Africa's birth and rebirth after apartheid's end. A must read, if only for refresh ourselves on history's lessons in a day and age when fascism & divisiveness are starting to read their ugly heads again...

It even had lessons on Dictatorship 101 ;) - "For individuals or groups who resisted these (apartheid) expulsions or contested their legality by appealing to the courts, he came up with the Black Prohibition of Interdicts Act, which prevented the judiciary from opposing government action and authorized the use of force against any rebellion. Another law prohibited the disclosure of any military action"

Patryx says

Molto interessante: mi ha fatto conoscere aspetti della storia del Sud Africa ignoti (a me ovviamente). La lettura è stata piacevole anche se in certi punti le digressioni rallentavano troppo; per riuscire ad apprezzarlo in pieno ho sempre dovuto ricordarmi che non era un libro di storia (come lo stesso autore scrive) ma, dato che non è possibile considerarlo semplicemente un romanzo, la mancanza di un'identità chiara è, secondo me, il principale punto di debolezza. In ogni caso lo consiglio a chi è interessato a conoscere meglio il Sud Africa.
