

REVIEW ARTICLE

Life Choices and South African Biography

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Redi Tlhabi, *Endings and Beginnings: A Story of Healing* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012), 288 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-1-4314-0461-2.

Dominique Botha, *False River: A Novel* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2013), 204 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-1-4152-0750-5.

Louise Viljoen, *Ingrid Jonker: Poet under Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Jacana; Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), 166 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-0-8214-2048-5.

Colin Bundy, *Govan Mbeki* (Johannesburg: Jacana; Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), 168 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-0-8214-2046-1.

Lindie Koorts, *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014), 466 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-0-624-05587-7.

Mark Gevisser, *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2014), 354 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-1-86842-588-4.

There is a moment in *Endings and Beginnings*, Redi Tlhabi's award-winning memoir about her friendship with a serial killer and serial rapist named Mabegzo, when Tlhabi asks Katlego, one of Mabegzo's childhood friends: 'So where did this monster come from?' (139). Tlhabi, now a journalist and writer, is trying to come to terms with her past and to understand how she could have loved a man who not only raped scores of women but also killed prolifically and, it seemed, with careless abandon. Like Mabegzo, Tlhabi grew up in Orlando East, Soweto; like many of his victims, she grew up with a fear of rape. When Katlego blames the adults in Mabegzo's life for turning Mabegzo into a fiend, Tlhabi responds: 'It sounds like you are making excuses for him. He still had a choice.'

Katlego: 'A choice? Where do you come from? For some people there are no choices. Do you think I choose to be unemployed?'

Tlhabi: 'No, but you're still not resorting to crime. That's a choice.'

Katlego: 'Maybe I haven't reached the same level of desperation Mabegzo reached. And if I do, maybe I also won't have a choice.'

Mabegzo was himself the product of a rape that their Soweto neighbourhood blamed on his mother and never let Mabegzo forget. At the time of his interview with Tlhabi, Katlego is 37, unemployed, living with his mother (in a wheelchair after she was knocked down by a car), and dependent on her disability grant.

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The exchange between Tlhabi and Katlego seems a good place to begin a review of some of the memoirs and biographies that have come out of South Africa in the past few years. This is because the back-and-forth between interviewer and interviewee allows us to examine recent trends in biographical writing in South Africa. If, as Tom Lodge said in a recent review of six South African biographies, the family remains a 'protectively hidden or even a consciously suppressed domain' of South African biography, difficult to reconstruct, how might we attempt just such a reconstruction?¹

One possible way, I would like to suggest, is by looking at how individuals dealt with life choices under apartheid. How did individuals choose to live the lives they led, take the decisions they took, or act the way they acted? This is not to suggest that there was a transparent connection between the choices that individuals made, on the one hand, and the decisions they took and the actions they carried out, on the other. Neither is it to claim that we are dealing here with autonomous subjects free from any constraints – or that individuals only ever acted in certain ways under apartheid. As one German put it, individuals make their lives but they do not make those lives just as they please. How, then, are we to talk about choice and its place in South African biography? How, in other words, are we to talk about lives lived under apartheid? More importantly, how are we to understand those lives and the choices and contexts that shaped them?

These are just some of the questions through which we can build new pathways not just to the hidden domain of the family but also to South African life in general. By asking these questions of each of the books under consideration in this review, we can also, hopefully, give new meaning to the 2010 argument between Ciraj Rasool and Jonathan Hyslop over what direction political biography in South Africa should take.² Rasool challenged the 'biographical illusion' created by certain approaches to life histories. This was because these approaches tended to treat individual lives as a 'linear human career, formed by an ordered sequence of acts, events and works, with individuals characterised by stability, autonomy, self-determination and rational choice.'³ Rasool urged biographers to eschew chronological narratives that assumed subjective coherence and individual stability, and focus instead on the relational nature of biographical production and contestation.⁴ Hyslop echoed many of Rasool's concerns. He criticised, for instance, the tendency in biographical writing in South

1 Tom Lodge, 'Secrets and Lives: South African Political Biography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 3, 2015, 687–97.

2 Ciraj Rasool, 'Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41, 1, 2010, 28–55. Jonathan Hyslop, 'On Biography: A Response to Ciraj Rasool', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41, 2, 2010, 104–15. Ciraj Rasool, 'The Challenges of Rethinking South African Political Biography: A Reply to Jonathan Hyslop', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41, 2, 116–20.

3 Rasool, 'Rethinking Documentary History', 28–9.

4 *Ibid.*, 49.

Africa to marginalise and trivialise what he called the politics of daily life.⁵ Despite the vehemence of their argument, Rasool and Hyslop actually agreed more than they disagreed about the direction the writing of biography should take in South Africa. More importantly, they agreed on the need for biographies that did not assume that their subjects were by definition national (not to mention rational) subjects, or that the lives under consideration were governed by a single final purpose, a telos. How, then, might the books under review help us develop new ways of reading biographies, and of understanding what it was like to live and act as an individual, a moral agent even, under apartheid?

Let us start, again, with *Tlhabi's Endings and Beginnings*. When Tlhabi is nine, her beloved father is murdered brutally on a street outside her home. His murderers are never caught. Two years later Tlhabi befriends a charming boy from her neighbourhood named Mahlomola, whom everyone calls Mabegzo. He is older than her. It is the late Eighties; the wheels are coming off the apartheid wagon, and crime, especially in townships, is high. Boys like Mabegzo are robbing businesses, stealing cars and terrorising women and girls like Tlhabi. This is part of a phenomenon known as 'jackrolling', whereby groups of armed boys kidnap women and girls (often from school or home) and subject them to gang rape for days and sometimes weeks on end before sending them back to their families. Mabegzo is an active part of this phenomenon. His notoriety spreads far and wide. Residents run away at the mere sight of him. Such is his reputation that one Sunday he is asked to leave a service (which he had attended at Tlhabi's invitation) at the local Catholic church. Congregants refuse to worship alongside a boy considered pure evil. Parents in Soweto are scared for their children; women and girls are scared for their lives. So is Tlhabi. She grows up with a fear of rape that engenders in her a lifelong and 'eternal rage' (138). Tlhabi tries to keep this rage under control but it bubbles to the surface every now and again, as when, during the same conversation with Katlego with which I began this article, Katlego delivers a 'gentle reminder, delivered subconsciously by decent people, that girls must be grateful if they haven't been raped' (138).

The bitter irony, for Tlhabi, is that she is spared the fate that meets many women and girls in Soweto at this time because Mabegzo takes a liking to her. Using charm towards her and murderous violence towards others, he protects her. He even kills a local thug named Sipiwe after Sipiwe threatens to rape Tlhabi. On the day that Mabegzo kills Sipiwe, he first consults his traditional healer, his *sangoma*, to see if that would be the appropriate day for the act. Having received permission from the *sangoma* to proceed, he runs to Sipiwe's house, invites the unsuspecting Sipiwe outside for a walk, and then stabs him in the neck. As Sipiwe falls to the ground, stunned, he looks at Mabegzo and says: 'Mfowethu. My brother.' Mabegzo spits at him. "I'm not your brother. And if you threaten Momo [Tlhabi] again, I'll kill you again" (142).

This is the violence that Tlhabi wants to understand. How could a boy who was so protective of her, so loving and so charming with her, commit such an act? Tlhabi had

5 Hyslop, 'On Biography', 105.

told Mabegzo about her harassment by Sipiwe. She feels complicit in his murder. So begins Tlhabi's quest to understand how goodness and evil (if we can call Mabegzo's actions that) can coexist inside one person.

Shortly after killing Sipiwe, Mabegzo himself is murdered by his partners in crime. They ambush him while he waits on a street corner for Tlhabi. The partners were worried that Mabegzo's apparently insatiable bloodlust might devour them. So they decided to kill him first. There are scenes of jubilation as word of Mabegzo's death spreads around Orlando East and other parts of Soweto. Residents dance over his corpse. Some kick it and spit at it. Others pray openly that Mabegzo go straight to hell. Even the police officers who are supposed to take the corpse away get in on the act, hurling insults at the dead Mabegzo. These are Sowetans reacting to the demise of a young man who had tormented them. But they are also neighbours of Tlhabi's and Mabegzo's, people that Tlhabi knows. Soweto here is and is not a backdrop. Tlhabi is not interested in clichés about the violence of place. She is interested in the violence that individuals commit and the possible reasons for that.

Tlhabi's quest to understand Mabegzo and deal with her feelings of complicity for his killing of Sipiwe leads her to some of his friends, his killers and his family. She wins her way into his family. Through conversations with various members of the family (including his mother, banished by her parents to Lesotho shortly after giving birth to Mabegzo), Tlhabi puts together a portrait of a boy wounded, shall we say, at birth. Wounded not by history but by a series of decisions taken by various people, some of whom thought they were acting in Mabegzo's and his mother's best interests. His own relatives, neighbours and other children taunt him about being the product of a rape. As Katlego tells Tlhabi: 'The monster was created by the adults who made him feel useless. He figured that if they thought the worst of him when he did good things, he might as well do bad things to earn the scorn they were already heaping on him' (139). Instead of blaming social and political structures for turning Mabegzo into the killer and rapist that he became, Tlhabi focuses on his family, friends and neighbours. She is interested not just in the choices that Mabegzo made but also in the choices that his family, friends and neighbours made, too, and in how the one shaped the other.

Going back to Rasool, we might want to think here of his argument about the relational construction of biographies. Mabegzo might have made his choices in the context of choices made by others in a social and political context where neither he nor they had full control, but he still made those choices. That is where Tlhabi's exchange with Katlego about choice comes in. As particular as Mabegzo's case was, it was not that unique. So why did he do the things he did? Why did many others boys (with backgrounds similar to or different from his) choose or not choose as he chose? It is perhaps here that we reach the limits of human understanding. Tlhabi can tell us a lot about Mabegzo and his context but she cannot take us inside his head. That is not a weakness necessarily.

Endings and Beginnings also provides a powerful antidote to my own memoir, *Native Nostalgia*, in that it gives the reader a palpable sense of the terror of rape that many women and girls had to live with in apartheid South Africa. If *Native Nostalgia*

was about life lived despite apartheid, *Endings and Beginnings* is about life lived in violence. But not simply a faceless 'structural' violence. Rather, a violence with names and faces behind it. Names like Mabegzo.

In Dominique Botha's novelistic memoir *False River*, the question confronting the protagonist and her family is how to live honourably in a society where even the notion of honour is tainted by race thinking and racially coded privileges. *False River* tells the story of the Bothas, an Afrikaans farming family in a small town in the Orange Free State that, crucially, is opposed to apartheid. What choices do they make? How do they express their opposition to apartheid? How do they make their peace with their social world, in which they are the only white family opposed to apartheid? The Bothas form meaningful relationships with black people in their area; the father treats his farm employees with respect and ignores those apartheid strictures that he can ignore; both parents are active in liberal circles, even if they have to drive to Johannesburg to participate. They send their children to English-medium boarding schools in Natal, where they excel despite the anti-Afrikaner prejudice they encounter there. But the Bothas do not live entirely in a world of their own making. Their eldest son Paul, an aspiring poet and rebellious soul, defers national conscription through university but deferment disappears as an option when he flunks out of the University of Cape Town. He is conscripted into Military Intelligence's Special Services Battalion. 'Are you ready for this?' Botha senior asks. Paul replies:

'I don't exactly have a choice, do I? What with the military industrial complex and the Special Battalion Ladies' Association stacked up against me?'

Botha senior: 'Don't you have an attitude towards me, sonny boy. You had a choice here. You could still be at university. This is your own fault.'

Paul: 'Did you have compulsory conscription in your day, Pa? Dropping out of Macademia was my choice. Being forcibly enlisted to murder black people should not be the only counter option. At least spare me the Calvinist hypocrisy of pretending there is some kind of just deserts [sic]'(157).

Paul's exchange with his father is a reminder that we should not understand the notion of choice in a simplistic fashion. There is nothing transparent about the choices that confront Paul. He has options (flee into exile; accept his call-up; join the anti-apartheid opposition – to name just three) but each one has consequences. For Paul and his family, the consequences are indeed dire. He honours his call-up but then attempts suicide while in the military. He is discharged from the military but, it seems, it is all downhill from there. When he eventually kills himself, the act comes less as a surprise than it perhaps should. Suicide is of course the ultimate choice. But what choice is it for Paul's family? In *False River*, we have a grim reminder of what happens when one family chooses to live against apartheid. The choice is the Bothas' for sure, but they cannot escape the choices that many apartheid-supporting whites around them make in response to their choice. We should also be careful not to make it appear as if Paul's suicide flowed directly from the choices that his parents made

to oppose apartheid in a small town. There is no necessary correspondence between the two. At the same time, we are reminded by Dominique Botha's poignant writing that the choices we make about how to live matter, especially in a country like South Africa, described in *False River* by a doctor friend of Paul's as a 'great place to practice trauma' (157).

The doctor, a German who may or may not have raped the protagonist of *False River*, is referring to the high number of people with traumatic injuries admitted to hospitals in South Africa. But he might as well be referring to the millions of South Africans forced by apartheid to endure all kinds of physical and psychic trauma. This, in a sense, is the subject of the next book under review: Louise Viljoen's wonderful biography of Ingrid Jonker, the famous Afrikaans poet who committed suicide in 1965 by drowning herself in the Atlantic Ocean. If Botha's memoir is a part-biography of Paul the aspirant Afrikaans poet, Viljoen's *Ingrid Jonker: Poet under Apartheid* is about an established Afrikaans poet. Both opposed apartheid; both killed themselves.

Viljoen seeks to take Jonker beyond the two things for which she is most famously known – her suicide and Nelson Mandela's recitation of her poem 'The Child' during the sitting of South Africa's first democratically elected parliament in May 1994. In the process, Viljoen wants to introduce us to Jonker the complex individual, as well as to Jonker's poetry. This is, again, a story about choice. Jonker's forbidding father was an ardent Afrikaner nationalist. He never forgave Jonker her resistance to apartheid. He took her opposition as a personal rejection. It was in fact a disavowal of everything he stood for. But, as Viljoen shows, this does not mean Jonker gave up trying to win her father's favour. Jonker's opposition to apartheid was a choice informed in part by her poetic temperament. The same choice also influenced her poetry.

When Jonker died, her only child, a daughter named Simone, was only seven. Asked in one interview to reflect on her mother's suicide and on its impact on her, Simone said that, while the suicide hit her hard, she accepted her mother's decision: 'She wanted to die. It was something she had thought about very deeply. It was her choice' (133). Responding to Jonker's suicide as well as that of the journalist Nat Nakasa, who killed himself in New York in July 1965, the playwright Athol Fugard said: 'We have paid again. Let us make no mistake; this was another instalment in the terrible price and South Africa – that profligate spender of human lives – paid it' (135). To be sure, Fugard was drawing attention to the wider social and political context within which Jonker (and Nakasa) acted. But there is no escaping the toll their choices and actions took on their families and on those close to them. It would not be fair to say that, for Jonker, her decision to end her life came directly out of her opposition to apartheid. It did not. As Viljoen shows so well, Jonker was a complicated individual with a complicated private life. She also had serious money troubles. But the private and the public cannot be separated neatly.

That the private and the public are always entangled is, in fact, one of the great insights offered by another of the books under review: Colin Bundy's biography of Govan Mbeki. Titled *Govan Mbeki*, Bundy's delightful book offers an excellent introduction to one of the most interesting lives in South African politics. For a time

one of the most educated black men in South Africa, Mbeki was a dedicated activist who made a number of choices over his long life (he was born in July 1910 and died August 2001) that affected not just his family but also his comrades. This after all was a man who, legend has it, upon meeting his eldest son Thabo Mbeki for the first time in more than twenty years simply shook Thabo's hand and greeted him formally as 'Comrade'. As Bundy shows, Mbeki could have been a traditional leader; he chose to become an activist. He could have been a fulltime teacher; he chose to become a revolutionary.

In the process of giving us a detailed portrait of Mbeki, Bundy also challenges many of the myths built up around Mbeki over the years. One of these concerns the legendary dispute on Robben Island between Mbeki the alleged dogmatist and Mandela the supposed pragmatist. Bundy challenges this as a caricature informed more by Mandela's charm than by fact. The other myth that Bundy tackles is of Mbeki the original theorist. While Mbeki was prolific as an activist-journalist, he was not a theorist. As Mbeki himself told Bundy: 'No, no, Michael Harmel, he was a theorist. Not me' (150). Harmel was a leading theorist of the South African Communist Party. Bundy does find evidence for some of the charges levelled at Mbeki by some of his comrades. Mbeki could indeed be 'hard, uncompromising, rigid, ruthless' but these, Bundy says, are adjectives conventionally attributed to revolutionaries (153). 'But explaining personality in terms of politics, or vice versa, is a limited exercise,' says Bundy (153). Human beings are more than the sum total of their politics – or of their choices.

This, in fact, is one of the key observations to take from Lindie Koorts' careful and rich biography of D.F. Malan. The book, *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism*, offers a number of insights into Malan's personality as well as his role in the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. Koorts tells us, among other things, that Malan was chronically shortsighted throughout his life. This basic description does not mean much on its own. But it gains in potency when Koorts, speaking of the archival research that went into the writing of her book, says the following: 'The contemporary reader might be surprised to discover that [Afrikaner nationalism and party politics] took precedence over matters of race [for people like Malan]. The Afrikaner nationalists did not discuss black politics in their letters, and they were not in contact with black politicians' (xiii). This was a shortsightedness of a different kind and it was perhaps worse than the kind that forced Malan to wear thick glasses for most of his life. Koorts does not say this explicitly but the connection bears making.

Koorts is also careful to show Malan in his complexity. Here was a theologian and a deeply religious man who objected to the marginalisation of coloured members of the Dutch Reformed Church but abhorred residential mixing between coloureds and poor whites. Here was a man deeply concerned about white poverty who refused to see the connections between black and white poverty. Malan was a committed Afrikaner nationalist. That means he believed in the apartheid project. In discovering state-led ways to 'save' the Afrikaner, especially the poor sort, he also helped support moves to destroy many worlds that did not fit into his narrow view of the world. This was about choices. It is also proof, if any were needed, that the choices of individuals

can have dire consequences, especially when the individuals making those choices wield power.

This final point is brought up exceptionally well in *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, Mark Gevisser's fine study of the city of his birth. Gevisser's book works at a number of levels. It is, at one level, about a young Gevisser's gradual discovery of parts of Johannesburg, such as Alexandra and Soweto, that were literally off the map of Johannesburg; at another level, it is about the loss of Johannesburg worlds (such as the multiracial pool parties hosted by Bram Fischer and his family at his family home in Johannesburg in the 1950s and 1960s; and a vibrant gay subculture suppressed but never destroyed completely by apartheid intolerance). How did multiracial couples and gay people live in a world officially hostile to their existence? That is what Gevisser's book grapples with. In the process, Gevisser gives us an intimate history of a city made up of things lost and found; friendships made and broken. If a big part of that destruction is due to apartheid, an even bigger part of the making of Johannesburg is due to the thousands of individuals who, despite the odds, made Johannesburg livable for black people, gay people and people whose lives and corners of Johannesburg did not, for a long time, even merit entries in the city's official maps.

Gevisser's book opens with an incident so violent it changes his relationship to Johannesburg. But the book ends on a hopeful note. Johannesburg, for all its violence and what some of its inhabitants have done to shake his belief in the city, is still home. 'Welcome home,' he says (332). A home that is open and shut, friendly and violent, big and small. A home made up of people who choose and act. They may not always choose rightly or act correctly. But they choose and they act. Recognise that and we might find in that recognition a new way of telling and reading stories about ourselves and the worlds we inhabit.