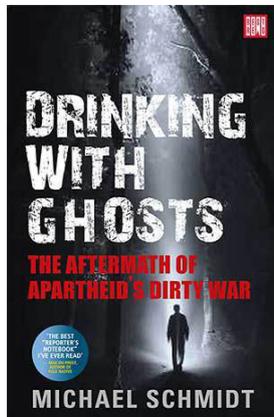


## Ghosts

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Drinking with Ghosts: The aftermath of apartheid's dirty war

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*Drinking with Ghosts: The Aftermath of Apartheid's Dirty War* is a powerful work dealing with South Africa's violent political struggles, its political transition, and the ways dark and secret pasts continue to haunt post-1994 South Africa. South Africa's modern political history is covered in an ever-increasing number of books, both scholarly and more popular. Similarly, there is an ever-increasing amount of scholarly work concerned with trauma, forgiveness and reconciliation. Taking their cue from the post-1994 South African government's internationally heralded Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many research and publicly engaged institutes now address these very issues. Schmidt's book is quite different. He doesn't share the notion that forgetting can be part of healing, and is sceptical of narratives of the 'miracle' 'Rainbow Nation' or the 'New South Africa'. Whilst respecting the scholarly, he will have none of the celebratory. Schmidt's view is succinct: South Africans will neither reconcile nor develop a common humanity unless its many hidden and covered-up abodes of darkness and terror are exposed, confronted, and written into history.

This book is also unlike other recent books by journalists writing within this broader field. It is not a biography, such as that of Eugene de Kock, or ghost-written accounts of tortured victims of MK camps in Angola. It's not a conspiracy story on the trail of red mercury, or 'reds under bed'. Nor is it in the heroic *grensvegter* mould. Nor is this a current journalist publishing in book form lengthy texts of his own press reports. The journalist's personal story of self-enlightenment is not highlighted over the real story – as it is in a recent study of the Marikana massacre. Nor is it a cut-and-paste book from journalists' courtroom media tweets amidst international press attention. Nor is this journalism as exposé making or celebrity seeking. And, the book is well published – by the Human Sciences Research Council's BestRed imprint – and includes scholarly footnotes, a bibliography and index; all of which are refreshingly different from other recent publications in this genre. This is 'dark and stormy night...' journalism, but only in one breathless sense. There are plenty of dark nights, conspirators and conspiracies, burning dwellings, atomic explosions, different poisons, armoured battles the likes of which were last seen in Africa in 1943, global geo-political plots and calculations, and ruthless plotters and calculators. There's a sniper rifle to be aimed at Mandela that passes hands between the two major political adversaries. And there are plenty of bodies – tortured, screaming, writhing, poisoned, burning, rotting and, in their many hundreds, being thrown alive out of aeroplanes over the Atlantic. There are many hanging questions – which in a novel would be mysteries and riddles. But this is not creative writing. As Rian Malan rightly observes, here is a 'high speed ride through the nightmares of recent South African history, with a nerveless, dead-eyed journalist at the wheel' (back cover).

But this book is more than what South Africans would usually see as South African history. It has a truly southern African and global reach. Schmidt understands his southern Africa better than most. Implicitly he sees an area with vital common threads. This area was not just within the imperial sway of European powers. Nor was it just colonial penetration – ports, towns, plantations, mines, roads and railways. The greater southern African area was a vast area of settler colonialism. The challenge to these settler societies involved Marxist–Leninist or Maoist national liberation movements – all of which embraced various forms of armed struggles in a Cold War environment. So too Schmidt challenges South Africans' senses, from the National Party's to liberation movements', of their uniqueness and exceptionalism. South Africa bore marked similarities to the military dictatorships of the South American region, particularly Chile. Botha's mirror image was Pinochet. They were cold warriors using terror as a means of internal repression and part of a wider geo-political bulwark against communist expansion. Schmidt challenges liberation movements' triumphalist narratives of democratic transition. Post-apartheid South Africa is a child of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Cold War. As Schmidt sees it, from 1990 to 1994, international and national political forces, crossing the previous Cold War political divides, came together to hammer out the political consensus on which the new South Africa was founded. For Schmidt it is these forces which have no interest in uncovering the country's dark and haunting pasts.

As an investigative journalist, Schmidt has real concerns over the direction his chosen craft is taking. For him, investigative journalism is being supplanted by reporters presenting incidents in isolation. Without giving names he gives examples of such conduct. Schmidt has two core conceptual and methodological understandings. He recognises the difference between what the French refer to as *verité* (truth) and *veracité* (veracity). He sees both the historian and the journalist as having

*as their task the search for veracity, rather than truth, for there are many truths, yet it is out of verifiable, established facts that the strands of different, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, and often illuminating truths emerge. (p. ix)*

To gain this veracity he employs what he refers to as 'forensic meditation'. Using his investigative work on the Marikana massacre he develops the point further:

*...in returning to the scene of a massacre – walking the paths of the killers to their termini, re-interviewing the victims and perpetrators, reconstructing the details and teasing out discrepancies. I have been 2 km down the Implats platinum mine, on the stopes where the rock-drillers sweat in 55 °C heat, the air thick with the bite of ammonia. I've yet to see our journalists walking the paths of the rock-drillers they are reporting on. (p. 307–309)*

What this means is that Schmidt needs to ask people question after question, find primary material sources, and find people to assist him. He is dogged in all regards, sometimes with absurdly amusing consequences. Importantly, this book is based on his notebooks, with some tidying up. It is so rare that journalist's notebooks make it into archives. This book is thus a fascinating look inside the craft of a good investigative journalist in a very dangerous high-stakes world. Indeed the book is comprised of such notes, placed within wider contexts. One chapter begins

with comment on judicial hangings in South Africa, to which is attached, appropriately, his January 2005 note of his investigations in Upington into the events of November 1985 and the 'Upington 14' and how these issues carry forward into the present.

Evelina de Bruin was the only woman amongst the 'Upington 14' sentenced to death for the murder of a municipal policeman in 1984 amidst street protests, rallies and running battles with police, who had opened fire on and tear-gassed protestors. Schmidt interviewed her in 2005. Ouma de Bruin has forgotten her name, but the only other woman then on death row was a *meisiekind* – a girl – from the Western Cape. She had just been moved to 'Die Pot', the preparation cell, and was to be hanged the following morning. As the 'fat warders' took her to the gallows, she called out to De Bruin '... I have hope that the cup that is passed to me will pass Ouma by'. In 1991, De Bruin and her husband and the other 'Upington 14' walked free, the Appellate Division having reduced their sentences to suspended sentences on the lesser charge of public violence. By that time they had spent 2 years on Death Row. Sadly her husband died 10 years after release, wracked by traumatic memories of the gallows doing its 'hungry work'. And, in a grotesque nuance altogether in harmony with so much else in this book, the only person who did give his life for the 'Upington 14' was their defence

lawyer, Anton Lubowski, who was gunned down by an operative of the appallingly misnamed South African Police's Civil Cooperation Bureau outside his Windhoek home in 1989 (p. 284–289).

But, as Schmidt believes, the cup must pass to us. '[O]ur beloved fractured would-be 'nation' is withdrawing again into mutually hostile racial laagers [so] it is time that we sit down together and drink with our ghosts' (p. xiv). South Africans across the political spectrum have to unravel their own version of the Chilean 'Pact of Forgetting'. Across South America their 'drums of bones' are beating as they now seek to come to terms with their brutal age of the generals. Our 'drums of bones' are already beating. With the recent xenophobic killings, the imminent Constitutional Court hearing into why the state has consistently shied away from prosecuting the security policemen responsible for the death in detention of MK operative Nokuthula Simelane, and with 'Prime Evil' Eugene de Kock now seemingly assisting authorities with more than finding long-lost and ill-buried corpses of people who were brutally killed, the timing of that ghostly wake may come sooner than expected or preferred. For South Africans, a first date with our ghosts, and subsequent 'daylight' (p. 356), is to read the gritty body of this book. Schmidt could win prizes for this work. All South Africans will benefit by reading this book, episode by harrowing episode.

