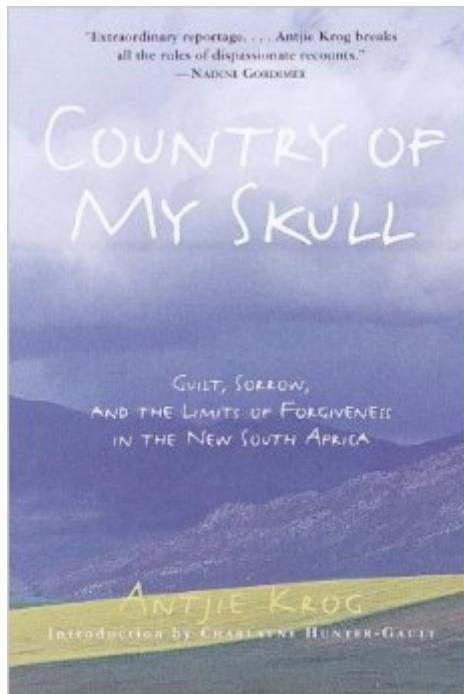


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Country Of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, And The Limits Of Forgiveness In The New South Africa



Synopsis

Ever since Nelson Mandela dramatically walked out of prison in 1990 after twenty-seven years behind bars, South Africa has been undergoing a radical transformation. In one of the most miraculous events of the century, the oppressive system of apartheid was dismantled. Repressive laws mandating separation of the races were thrown out. The country, which had been carved into a crazy quilt that reserved the most prosperous areas for whites and the most desolate and backward for blacks, was reunited. The dreaded and dangerous security force, which for years had systematically tortured, spied upon, and harassed people of color and their white supporters, was dismantled. But how could this country--one of spectacular beauty and promise--come to terms with its ugly past? How could its people, whom the oppressive white government had pitted against one another, live side by side as friends and neighbors? To begin the healing process, Nelson Mandela created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, headed by the renowned cleric Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Established in 1995, the commission faced the awesome task of hearing the testimony of the victims of apartheid as well as the oppressors. Amnesty was granted to those who offered a full confession of any crimes associated with apartheid. Since the commission began its work, it has been the central player in a drama that has riveted the country. In this book, Antjie Krog, a South African journalist and poet who has covered the work of the commission, recounts the drama, the horrors, the wrenching personal stories of the victims and their families. Through the testimonies of victims of abuse and violence, from the appearance of Winnie Mandela to former South African president P. W. Botha's extraordinary courthouse press conference, this award-winning poet leads us on an amazing journey. *Country of My Skull* captures the complexity of the Truth Commission's work. The narrative is often traumatic, vivid, and provocative. Krog's powerful prose lures the reader actively and inventively through a mosaic of insights, impressions, and secret themes. This compelling tale is Antjie Krog's profound literary account of the mending of a country that was in colossal need of change.

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Customer Reviews

This book struck me, as an Afrikaner, as a catharsis in itself. It enacts what it describes. It is its own peculiar truth commission for each reader. Foreign readers will not share this special experience, but will be absolutely enthralled by the poetic rendition of what appears to be a struggle to get to grips, in literary terms, with an immense personal experience. There are some very disturbing parts. My criticism is that the self-conscious literary symbolism at times appears to be strained, and to be at odds with the dialogue, or with the dramatic moment. What is essentially brooding cogitation is often presented rather implausibly as natural dialogue. It should be remembered that Krog is a poet. One should read the book as one would a dramatic monologue displaying someone trying to cope with a confused flood of guilt, elation, sadness and hope. And racial shame. The book represents an experience well worth the inevitable depression that will accompany its reading. It is also an extremely successful presentation, in digestible and dramatic format, of a phenomenon that remains crucial to the post-apartheid South African reality. It is, in other words, good history and good journalism as well as good poetry.

Thankyou Antjie. You clarify a brave, extraordinary venture into reconciliation as a serious option to persistent conflict. It must have been a harrowing journey for you. I hope I meet and thank you someday (indeed, and again thank you from my soul, I actually did at Columbia University, although had not expected your deeply respected reaction). I've worked throughout Southern Africa off and on for many years. For several of those years I carried two passports, one for when I flew via Johannesburg, and the other with a visa for entry into any African country, who might refuse me passage if they saw my TYD.VERBLYPERMIT stamp. For me personally, apartheid was a stain on my heritage and on the distorted world into which I had grown up. Despite an Oxford degree in English literature, I continued reading thousands of books for more than thirty years. This is the only book I have ever read which completely tore my heart to tears.

This is simply a fantastic piece of literature, written by a very talented, brave, and steadfast

journalist, the great Antjie Krog. Krog, an Afrikaaner (South-African born Caucasian), as part of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to covering the ongoing stories of torture, abuse, murder and countless other violations to human rights revealed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings in 1996, recounts many, of a cross section of stories, here in this book. We also get a strong sense of the psychological and emotional toll it takes, to bare witness to the stories, told by, both, victims and victimizers. Children were left orphans, wives were left widows, casualties were left permanently disfigured and disabled, in the aftermath of extensive race riots in South Africa, following apartheid (or the enforced segregation of Blacks from Whites) in neighboring townships, throughout the town of Soweto, and beyond. Just a note to anyone who intends to read this book. Please keep in mind that many of the stories, recounted in Krog's novel are graphic and very disturbing. However, they are also invaluablely important. I believe this is a story everyone should be aware of. Many people heard the words "apartheid" "Soweto" and "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in passing on the news and in the media, without really having a sense of the significance of the very important events, taking place in South Africa in 1996. This is your chance to truly come to understand the degree to which racism destroys communities, divides people and ultimately leads to fateful consequences.

I bought my copy of "The Country of My Skull" while on a trip to South Africa in August, 1998. This is the first-hand observers view of the South African apartheid amnesty hearing in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu). This is a gripping and unsettling book. Hard to read because of the intensity of the tales that are retold by the author. But this is an important book because we learn again the extent of man's inhumanity to man. If you are interested in South Africa, politics, racial relationships, or human struggle against injustice, this is a "must read" book. Nothing like it has ever been published.

Here is a complex book that scratches the surface of a very complex ordeal; Apartheid. Krog gives a very personal report on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a Committee charged with hearing the crimes of perpetrators in Apartheid and deciding on their amnesty respectively. Her language is very emotional at times, even suspiciously involved. You can sense in her writing her own struggle to explore the apathy of her own ethnicity, the white Afrikaaner, in the face of such atrocities. Overall, a very complex book. I couldn't put this one down and finished it in about 3 days. If you have an interest in Apartheid you may gain new insight on the matter after having read this.

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