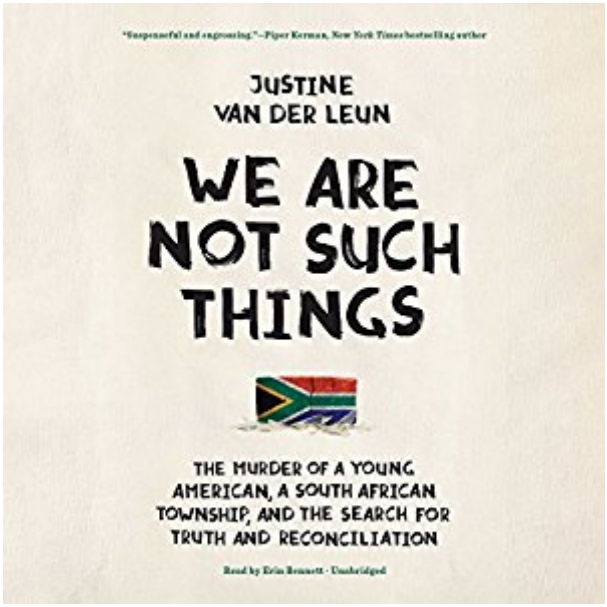
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We Are Not Such Things: The Murder Of A Young American, A South African Township, And The Search For Truth And Reconciliation



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Synopsis

Justine van der Leun reopens the murder of a young American woman in South Africa, an iconic case that calls into question our understanding of truth and reconciliation, loyalty, justice, race, and class. The story of Amy Biehl is well known in South Africa. The 26-year-old white American Fulbright scholar was brutally murdered on August 25, 1993, during the final, fiery days of apartheid by a mob of young black men in a township outside Cape Town. Her parents' forgiveness of two of her killers became a symbol of the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. Justine van der Leun decided to introduce the story to an American audience. But as she delved into the case, the prevailing narrative started to unravel. Why didn't the eyewitness reports agree on who killed Amy Biehl? Were the men convicted of the murder actually responsible for her death? And then Van der Leun discovered another brutal crime committed on the same day, in the very same area. The true story of Amy Biehl's death, it turned out, was not only a story of forgiveness, but also a reflection of the complicated history of a troubled country. We Are Not Such Things is the result of Van der Leun's four-year investigation into this strange, knotted tale of injustice, violence, and compassion. The bizarre twists and turns of this case and its aftermath - and the story that emerges of what happened on that fateful day in 1993 and in the decades that followed - come together in an unsparing account of life in South Africa today. Van der Leun immerses herself in the lives of her subjects and paints a stark, moving portrait of a township and its residents. We come to understand that the issues at the heart of her investigation are universal in scope and powerful in resonance. We Are Not Such Things reveals how reconciliation is impossible without an acknowledgment of the past, a lesson as relevant to America today as to a South Africa still struggling with the long shadow of its history.

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Customer Reviews

IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢m a white, former South African (liberal, anti-apartheid activist, left in 1975) who knows the country and Cape Town, and worked in the townships and District Six as a medical student and an intern at the University of Cape TownÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s teaching hospitals. Therefore I was naturally drawn to read this book.The author, an American visiting South Africa with her SA-born husband, manages to get under the skin of South Africa, below the apparent truths, specifically of a particular event at a particular time in the countryÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s history - the senseless, non-political, brutal murder by a mob, of Amy Biehl, an idealistic 26-year-old American woman who was working for a better South Africa for people of color and especially women, during the transition to black rule under Nelson Mandela. In August 1993, the month of AmyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s murder, the country was on fire.Some of the descriptions of violence, including the actual murder of Ms Biehl are profoundly disturbing on many levels. The author captures the mood of the times and of the mobs. In addition, through her descriptions of the real-life characters in the book, she paints an accurately wrenching picture of the often grinding misery, depradation, struggles, and everyday violence and death that was and is life in the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Ëœnon-whiteÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ townships ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ among the many consequences and legacies of apartheid. Into the story the author weaves South African history for context, and discusses the Truth & Reconciliation Commission ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ its purposes and complex outcomes for different individuals.To read this book as a former South African is to be catapulted back into the turmoil and hate and incomprehensible brutality and injustices of apartheid, that led so many of us to leave; but also into present-day South Africa, 22 years after MandelaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ANC came to power. One of the authorÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s astute observations about current South Africa was this, in reference to an episode of road rage she experienced: ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦South Africans were outraged ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ about race relations, corruption, ineptitude, money, class, politics. Beneath a thin veneer of good manners, the whole society was teeming with tension and entitlement, where people packed pistols and where everyone was perceived as either a potential perpetrator or a potential victim. Perhaps for these reasons, and because the cops rarely enforced traffic laws and took bribes South Africans were notoriously aggressive, reckless drivers.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•Unfortunately, one has to dig through

a lot of dross to get to a nugget like that, because the book is way way too long - unnecessarily so - and reading it was an exercise in frustration and exasperation.First, it oversells itself on the central topic. It presents itself as having unearthed major new truths about the day and circumstances of Amy BiehlÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s death. The reader keeps wondering, 'OK, where is the meat, when will she cut to the chase?' So, it turns out - after much broad hinting along the way - that one of the guys who claimed to have taken part in the killing of Ms Biehl turned out to have confessed in order to protect / cover for his younger brother, who was in fact one of the killers. And - earlier that same day in a township nearby, there was a brutal attack on a white man, a city electrical worker, by some of the same mob, an event barely reported until now. The author tracks down this history and the individual himself, a man who is white, but yet another casualty of apartheid. While the story and journey of discovery are of interest, now, almost 25 yrs later they are not discoveries of consequence. No-one will be charged or released.While the author did indeed go to enormous lengths to uncover heretofore unknown facts, unfortunately she presents every detail (so it seems) of her journey of discovery with mind-numbingly excessive detail and repetition. Repeated visits to the townships, repeated and endlessly detailed descriptions of the townships (just a few would have sufficed), non-pertinent details of peoplesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ lives and relationships, clothes, furniture, living rooms, where people hang the pictures on the walls in the townships, etc. Proper editing should have reduced this book in length by some 50%, and its impact would have been that much greater. Decent editing would have also picked up some errors of fact and sloppy sentences ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ though these are minor comments in the overall scheme of things.In addition, the author comes across as mean-spirited about a central figure in the book ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ AmyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s mother, Linda Biehl. Linda Biehl is woman whose daughter ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ educated, smart, humble, gracious, idealistic, spirited, committed, accomplished - was murdered at the age of 26 years in a horrific, gratuitously brutal manner by a mindless mob, for the crime of being a white person in the wrong place at the wrong time. Imagine being the parent of a young woman who is bludgeoned and stabbed to death ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ a half a world away from your familyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s world in California. Yet Linda and Peter Biehl and their family journeyed frequently to South Africa, and repeatedly and consistently acted with grace and kindness and a generosity of spirit and forgiving and financial donation. They learned about the country and its complex history and problems. They reached out to AmyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s killers, forgave them, employed them, set up the Amy Biehl Foundation in AmyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s memory to honor her ideals, to try and continue her work. While acknowledging the facts of all this, the author often writes disparagingly of Linda BiehlÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s demeanor and appearance, the author displaying

her impatience / suspicion of Linda; in effect, the author second-guesses the grief, motivation and coping mechanisms of a bereaved parent. Linda then suffers another loss when her husband Peter dies at the age of 59 of colon cancer.Compared with her attitude toward Linda Biehl, in some ways the author appears to show greater affinity and affection for some of the shady characters and killers in her story. She has osmosed the South African condition, and evinces it.Eric Hassall MDSan Francisco, CA

I worked in South Africa from 1990 to 1994 and spent a lot of time there in the 1970s. I spoke with Amy Biehl about working on voter education a couple days before she was murdered and I worked with most of the leaders mentioned in the book. For me, it was painful to revisit the events of that time, but think the author did an outstanding job of capturing the atmosphere at that time. It is very Cape Town centric, so it misses some very interesting developments in other parts of the country that were taking place at that time, but she does an excellent job of covering a small area. That is in sharp contrast to the majority of foreigners, especially Americans, who saw events in South Africa as merely a continuation of the civil rights struggle in the U.S. My only criticisms are that it could have been at least 100 pages shorter and, in spite of promising new insights, she doesn't reveal anything new. Even the attack on the city worker earlier in the day that is supposed to be the key to revealing some startling truth is not new. I remember it. It was, unfortunately, not particularly unique at that time, so it did not attract the kind of attention Amy Biehl's murder did. It also didn't provide the ANC with a powerful propaganda tool with which to beat the PAC. The author worked hard to uncover some startling revelation, but she failed to uncover very much. Nevertheles, it is a fine account of an exciting, but painful time in recent South African history.

This is not only one of the best books I've read on South Africa (& I've read plenty), but one of the best books I've read recently, period. (And no, I'm not a friend of the author's, nor did I receive a free copy!) With an open mind, an open heart and an ever-open notebook, Justine van der Leun, an outsider, manages to capture the texture of contemporary South African life, with all its confusing and heart-breaking contradictions, better than just about anyone I can think of. And her reinvestigation of the Amy Biehl case is a real eye-opener and reality check, even for those of us who are familiar with that story (or thought we were). What drives this narrative is the author's attention to detail, her curiosity, her compassion, and the vivid cast of characters she introduces us to. Wonderful writing, to be savored for its own sake.

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