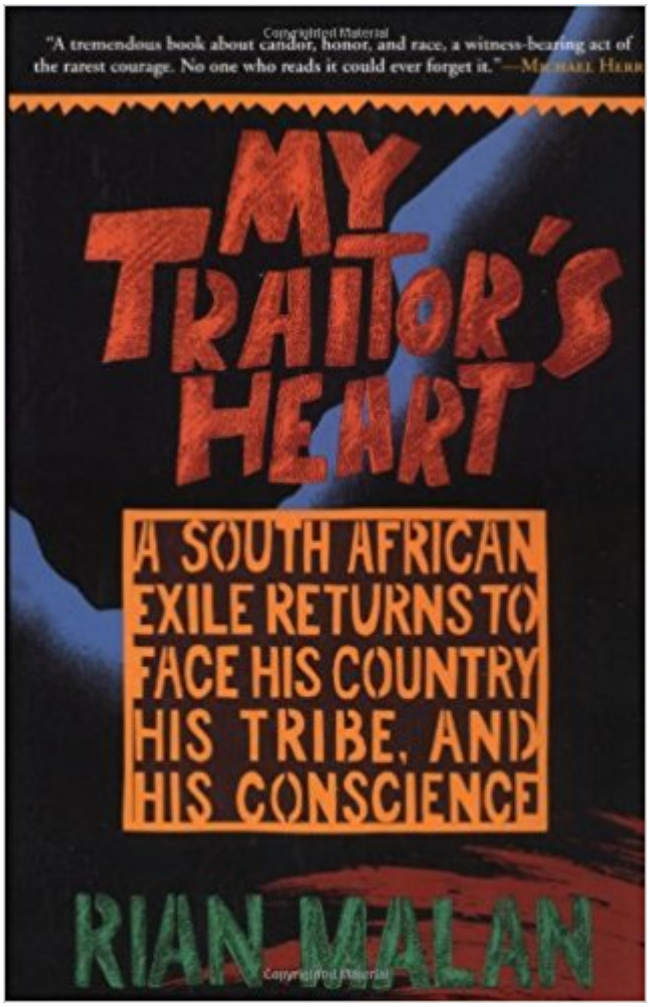
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My Traitor's Heart: A South African Exile Returns To Face His Country, His Tribe, And His Conscience



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Synopsis

A classic of literary nonfiction, My Traitor’s Heart has been acclaimed as a masterpiece by readers around the world. Rian Malan is an Afrikaner, scion of a centuries-old clan and relative of the architect of apartheid, who fled South Africa after coming face-to-face with the atrocities and terrors of an undeclared civil war between the races. This book is the searing account of his return after eight years of uneasy exile. Armed with new insight and clarity, Malan explores apartheid’s legacy of hatred and suffering, bearing witness to the extensive physical and emotional damage it has caused to generations of South Africans on both sides of the color line. Plumbing the darkest recesses of the white and black South African psyches, Malan ultimately finds his way toward the light of redemption and healing. My Traitor’s Heart is an astonishing book -- beautiful, horrifying, profound, and impossible to put down.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Like many white South Africans of his generation, Rian Malan fled his country to dodge the draft. He felt incredibly guilty for this act, but would have felt equally guilty for not doing it: "I ran because I wouldn’t carry a gun for apartheid, and because I wouldn’t carry a gun against it." Malan, the product of a well-known Afrikaner family, returned to South Africa and produced My Traitor’s Heart, which explores the literal and figurative brutalities of apartheid. Death is a constant presence on these pages, and the narrative is driven by Malan’s criminal reportage. This acclaimed book intends to illuminate South Africa’s poisonous race relations under apartheid, and few books do it this well. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This soul-searching account of an Afrikaner’s life in apartheid South Africa joins a growing body of publications by South Africans of every ethnic group. Malan, the grand nephew of a major definer of the doctrine of apartheid, Daniel Malan, left South Africa in 1977, in part to avoid military service, and returned eight years later. This book reports his observations of violent death in the land. He details instances of whites killing blacks, blacks killing blacks, blacks killing whites, politically motivated murder, and economically motivated murder. Well written, gripping, and disturbing, the descriptions leave one with a sense of despair which makes Malan’s final note of hope all the more remarkable. Recommended for adult general readers as well as those with a special interest in South Africa.- Maidel Cason, Univ. of Delaware Lib., NewarkCopyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The "troubling" aspects of Rian Malan’s biography are easily described: everything in his life and in the history of his South Africa, the centuries of ever-hardening racism and violence of his "tribe" -- he is a Boer, the scion of a prominent family, whose ancestors played horrific roles in the formulation of apartheid, of absolute racial separation -- but also in the ’social anthropology’ of the Zulu and other dark-skinned tribes that the colonizing whites so brutalized. In fact, the most horrifying incidences of violence Malan recounts are incidents of black violence against whites (understandable to liberals in other lands!) and, worse, of black violence against other blacks, based on ancient tribal feuds and on rival politics of resistance to white rule. Part historical study, part personal apologia, part investigative journalism, "My Traitor’s Heart" is the sort of narrative that circles around itself, prefigures its own direction but then moves elsewhere, and never becomes entirely committed to a thesis; that’s not a flaw, in my mind, since Malan circles around himself in equal uncertainty of his own role and his own worth. As his title suggests, this is the confession of a troubled man, whose primary trouble is that he can’t find an answer to his most important question: "how to live in his own country?"The easiest summary of Malan’s analysis of the racial catastrophe called South Africa, the summary that seems so terribly, terrifyingly inevitable, is straight out of Kipling: "Black is black and white is white, and never the twain shall meet!" But for Malan, the scion of apostles of apartheid, that summary is unconscionable. Loathsome. Hopeless. An answer that solves nothing. This IS a book that ends itself in a welter of despair, though there’s the unconvincing rhetorical ’promise’ of long-term good intentions.The "troublesome" aspects of this book are more subjective and harder to express. I don’t admire the author. I don’t entirely trust the author’s investigations of his own conscience. Malan repeatedly expresses his own self-doubt, his own

shame-faced realizations of his superficiality and posturing as a liberal leftist. Well and good, but I still don’t feel comfortable with him. He wants too much that we should praise his candor and esteem his penitential embarrassment over his life choices. But who am I then, to treat him so skeptically? I’ve never visited South Africa. I’ve scarcely studied its history or anthropology. I’ve read a few novels, seen a few films, seen the plays of Athol Fugard performed for predominantly white audiences. How can I confirm anything Malan writes? How can I feel confident that he is depicting the society in any sort of entirety? Or is he ignoring vast significant aspects of that society, out of his own stubborn personalism? My confidence in him was sorely shaken, after I finished the book, by my discovery of his role in "denying" the severity of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. He has since attempted to explain his position by maintaining that the international health/welfare agencies have "exaggerated" the extent of the epidemic in order to boost their fund-raising, in other words, for selfish institutional aggrandizement. That’s the sort of accusatory sour-grapes that I hear altogether too often about every agency -- environmental, scientific, humanitarian -- and that serves nobody’s well-being.So who is the real Malan? Despite the insistent tenor of self-revelation in this book, I can’t help feeling that the author is still a poseur, a man masking himself in humility, annoyingly proud of being humble.

This is hands down the best book I’ve read on South Africa, and that’s including Nelson Mandela’s autobiography. Not to take anything away from Mandela, but his journey isn’t representative of how most whites and blacks lived during apartheid. This book started as a genealogy of a ruling Boer family and the history of racial oppression in South Africa. But it quickly turned into a South African Spoon River Anthology of sorts, told in equal parts true crime narrative and journey of self-discovery.A classic TV show used to say, "There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them." Rian Malan tells several of them, and the overall impact is amazingly powerful, bleak, and shocking. There are villains, heroes, victims, monsters and traitors. And some people play more than one role. The story is about black and white, but it’s not as black and white as you might think.

I’ve read this book twice - once before a longer stay in South Africa and again after I had visited there several times. It helped me understand so much about South Africa as a country and helped me appreciate literature by South African authors. I feel certain that there is no one book that can give a reader a comprehensive overview of such a vast country with such a long history of trouble, but this one gets the reader on the right path and sheds light on things that are particularly South

African in a way that helps put the puzzle pieces together.

I originally read excerpts of this book in college when I was in a senior seminar course on South Africa that was basically an entire semester long. It should be said that I am a white American, and have never traveled to Africa, or South Africa, hence the title. When I read the parts of the book our professor gave us, I remember thinking that Malan was a powerful writer and gave us a perspective on life in the country that none of the other things we had read had given us. I believe she gave us Part 1 of the book to read. I was surprised when we were in class that she ended up bashing the author, for reasons I am not truly clear about, but I think it had to do with how he discussed sleeping with a black woman and what that meant to him. She was Nigerian, so I think it must have disgusted her. I never agreed with her analysis then, and reading it now, I agree with her even less. Malan gives a truthful account of what it was like to be born a white man in Africa, and a "liberal" one at that, which make irk some readers. He does attest to his fears of the various black tribal cultures and his experiences inside the townships and Soweto. But he does so in a way that the reader knows this is what he means by his "Traitor's Heart". His heart sides with the oppressed, but he loves in the comfort the oppressor's provide. This brings great conflict in his soul, and this book is an account of it. I still disagree with my professor, who must have thought he was just another white liberal who didn't understand the dynamics of the struggles in South Africa. I don't believe this to be true. The meat of the book focuses on various acts of random violence, which became the norm in South Africa under Apartheid. And this was not just white on black atrocities, but black on black as well. Wars between blacks were fought over land, history, tribal differences, and the like. He even goes into how witchcraft became a part of the struggle between blacks. It is very complicated to get into, and I don't want to go on forever here, but I honestly think there is something very special about this book. It makes us think about how we perceive others and the us against them mentality of the human psyche that we all possess. This book was finished before the end of apartheid, but still has plenty of lessons to teach the reader. I highly recommend it to anybody interested in politics, war, Africa, even just psychology in general. It really is a masterpiece of non-fiction in my opinion. The only thing I didn't like about the book was the trivialization he makes of his exile in America, and the different racial and class boundaries that exist here. I think the reason is that during the 80's South Africa was almost like America was during its slavery days, and at the very least Jim Crow, so he felt as though there was nothing to fight for here, as though this society was fully integrated with no trouble. In any case, he doesn't go into his time here much, and says he felt that America was all about drinking, screwing, and having a good time. Which to him felt empty. I think he didn't look

deep enough, but this wasn't a story about America, so I don't blame him even though I disagree. Part 3 of the book is as sad as the rest but gives us an inside look at what it was like for a white man to live deep in the heart of Africa, which was interesting as well. Again, I think this is a great read, enjoy.

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