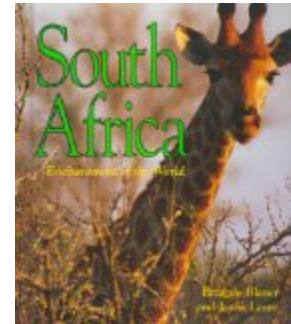


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ettagale Blauer, Jason Laure. *South Africa*. New York: Children's Press, 1998. 144 pp. \$22.40 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-516-20606-6.

Reviewed by Peter Midgley (Department of English, University of Alberta)
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So Enchanted with South Africa that you forget the facts?

Let's get this straight once and for all: Cape Town is NOT the capital city of South Africa. Capetonians like to think so, and are making every effort to keep the parliament in their city, but in reality Pretoria has been the capital since 1910. Yet almost every book on South Africa insists on putting the cute little "capital" star next to Cape Town, and this one by Blauer and Laure is no exception.

Another popular misconception is that Afrikaans is exclusively the language of the Afrikaner people. In the twentieth century, white Afrikaners did indeed claim sole proprietorship to the language and turned it into an ideological tool to further their political agenda. But in reality, almost half the speakers of the language are not white Afrikaners, but Coloureds and Africans. In recent years, Afrikaans-speakers of all races have been attempting to get rid of the terrible baggage that the language has to carry in the wake of apartheid atrocities. It is therefore probably the language in South Africa that is spoken as a home language by the greatest ethnic diversity of people in the country.

Having dispensed with my personal pet peeves in the initial paragraphs, let me attempt to start my assessment again. Oh, one last one: why do all other countries have to be investigated and assessed in relation to the United States of America?

Now let us try again....

This is a well-conceived, entertaining book on South Africa. The authors have gone to a lot of trouble to research the country and to present younger readers with

interesting facts. For most of the book, the research has been conducted thoroughly and presented in a very readable format. The authors provide clear, thought-provoking insights into life in South Africa and manage to summarise a complicated history with relatively few errors.

While the history of the twentieth century is largely accurate, and summarised with insight, the events of the nineteenth century are less accurately described. On page forty, the authors note: "The Afrikaners established three independent states that were joined in 1860 to form the South Africa Republic. While this is true (for the three independent states of Ohrigstad, Potchefstroom and Soutpansberg did unite in 1860), the impression is created that it was these states that were eventually involved in the South African War of 1899-1902 (referred to in the book as the Anglo-Boer war – a name that gives no recognition to the role played by Africans in this struggle, or of the fact that it was, ultimately, their future that would be determined by the outcome of the war). In fact, the SAR had as an ally the Boer Republic of The Orange Free State and Boer loyalists from Natal, an independent Boer Republic which had been annexed previously. It is these republics that formed an alliance against the British forces.

In a similar way, the reference to the Frontier Wars (or the Xhosa Wars, as they are also known) leaves the reader with a misguided impression of the events. While the authors are to be lauded for mentioning the great cattle killing, their rendition of the event is inaccurate.

Between 1837 and 1857, a series of vicious wars were waged on South Africa's Eastern Frontier between the settlers and the AmaXhosa people. Having summarised the events accurately thus far, the authors now continue: "Thousands of Xhosa cattle were killed and more than fifty thousand of their cattle were taken by the British. This became known as the cattle-killing disaster of the 1850s. More than one third of all the Xhosa died of starvation when they lost both their cattle and their lands" (42). It appears from this passage that the British alone were responsible for the wholesale destruction of Xhosa cattle. Nothing is mentioned of Nongqawuse, whose prophecy led to this disastrous event. In April 1856, an adolescent girl, Nongqawuse, was reputedly visited by the spirits of the ancestors who told her that if the people slaughtered their cattle and did not cultivate any crops, the dead would arise and assist them in battle against the settlers. Taken in by the prophecy, Sarhili, the Xhosa chief, ordered the injunction of the prophet to be obeyed. The eagerly awaited insurrection did not occur on 11 August, 1856 as prophesied, and the British troops used the subsequent famine to plunder the remainder of the herds and to overcome a weakened Xhosa army.[1] Thus the power of the mighty Xhosa nation was broken. The cattle-killing disaster does not refer directly to the actions of the British, but to the aftermath of Nongqawuse's prophecy.

There is also a general misconception that South Africa comprises of the Western Cape and a few straggling bits of land somewhere in the interior. Let the truth be known: the Cape Peninsula is where European habitation of Southern Africa began; it is not where it ended. The pictures in most travel books feature a few pictures of an imposing mountain and a couple of Cape-Dutch buildings, and a wine farm. Throw in a couple of lions, an elephant and a glossy picture of a township shack, and the picture of South Africa that the world sees is complete. Fortunately, Blauer and Laure manage to avoid this pitfall by providing a balanced view of the different aspects of the country: pictures of the political struggle, the natural beauty and the wealth and the poverty all make for

a sophisticated and well-conceived photographic collage of South Africa and its people. The photographs and the inserts are informative and interesting.

In the end, it is all about (mis)representation of the facts, a blurring of realities that skews the image foreigners have of our country. Like the Cape Town thing. Perhaps a small error, you might argue. Yet it is "small" errors such as these that compound to truly spoil what is otherwise an excellent book. The sections are clearly marked, statistics are interesting and up to date. There is a wonderful timeline with an informative "Facts-at-a-glance" section, the authors have gone to a great deal of trouble to use politically correct phrases, such as the Ncome River instead of the loaded "Blood River." But even these sections are plagued with small errors: Cape Town is not the capital, mount Injasuti is not the highest elevation, this honour belongs to nearby Thaba Ntlenyana, which at 3482m is a full 100m higher than Injasuti. These small errors, misrepresentations, twists of the truth, call them what you like, counterbalance the great sociological perspective presented in the book.

If you are prepared to overlook the few historical inaccuracies and typos (p.22,43, 89, for example), then this is one of the better, meatier, more balanced introductions to South Africa that I have read recently. And there are many companies jumping onto the bandwagon to milk South Africa's current popularity in the international arena. This book is recommended with caution. The references to the websites are excellent and the background material will all be useful, if somewhat advanced for the intended readers.

Note

[1]. *Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa. The Real Story*. Expanded Third Edition, 1994. p 137.

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