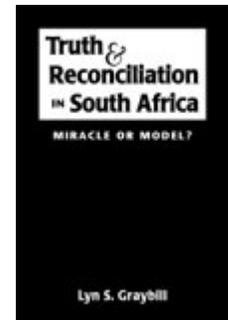


Lyn S. Graybill. *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Miracle or Model?*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002. xiv + 231 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58826-081-9.



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Telling the Story of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Lyn Graybill set herself ambitious objectives, and therefore demanding measures of success, for this book. Unlike the narrow perspectives adopted by many other commentators on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Graybill sought a multi-disciplinary approach applied to a search for the whole story (pp. xi-xii). In particular, as the book's title demonstrates, she aimed to establish the ground on which to address the question of whether the TRC was a "miracle," something impossible to replicate in other countries, or a model which could be drawn on by diverse architects of transition from oppressive rule to democracy.

Graybill, in her finely measured and scholarly way, defines the scope and reach of her work in the book's preface. The definition left me with several misgivings. Firstly, in principle, I am skeptical of endeavours to embrace "the whole story." Secondly, I wondered about the timing of the book. It arrives on our shelves with the publication of the codicil to the TRC's final report and the

formal closure of the TRC process imminent. It arrives, in other words, before the potentially crucial final moves in "the story." It also arrives before we have any clarity on whether the South African state intends to unravel the TRC process by introducing some form of general amnesty, by choosing not to embark on a program of prosecutions, and by failing to deliver on meaningful reparations. The book's assessment of the TRC as model, then, is seriously hampered by its timing. Thirdly, Graybill defines the space for her enquiry against "the noncritical approach of many recent books" (p.xi) and "the conceptual approach of 'experts' ... whose reflections seem to me overly abstract" (p. xi). While neither of these are straw men, my reading of the literature suggests a rich array of other approaches against which Graybill might have posited her own space. Finally, I am suspicious of either/or questions, so that the preface left me dubious as to the usefulness of the central question Graybill had chosen to pose herself.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters, the first twelve providing the framework for a return

to her central question in the final chapter. Chapter 1 offers cursory but useful accounts of truth commissions predating the TRC, and of the novel features and core organisational structures of the TRC. Chapters 2 and 3 provide views on the roles played by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in shaping the TRC and making it possible. These chapters are full of insight, particularly in exploring the Christian roots feeding South Africa's particular formulation of processes for reconciliation. The latter is a theme which Graybill weaves through the rest of her study, and is arguably where her analysis is strongest. I would hesitate to draw the conclusion which she does: "What made the reconciliation model workable in South Africa was that the message of the church on truth, forgiveness, and reconciliation was embraced in postapartheid South African society" (p. 166). However, her account of the TRC's shaping by Christian theology, analysis of Tutu's profound personal impact on the Commission's work, and connecting of Christian theology to broader indigenous societal dynamics are compelling.

In chapters 4 to 7, Graybill shines a light on the notion of forgiveness in relation to the work of the TRC, amnesty as an idea and as a TRC process, the place and value of storytelling, and gender issues informing the TRC. Here Graybill's scholarship is impeccable, drawing on wide multi-disciplinary reading and close study of sources for her elegant and very readable analyses. Just one small quibble--wide as her research reaches, she fails to engage the work of Jacques Derrida on forgiveness and reconciliation. His scrutiny of the TRC within a deconstructive philosophical frame, in particular, demands attention.

The TRC's hearings on specific sectors, professions, and institutions are the focus of chapters 8 to 10. Graybill offers accounts and analysis of four hearings--those on the health sector, business, the media, and faith communities. As always, she is insightful and thought-provoking. However, I would have liked a tougher motivation for the se-

lection of these particular hearings and exclusion of others, as well as an overarching analysis of the significance of this category of hearing. Such analysis is crucial given critiques of the TRC's mandated focus on gross human rights violations suffered by individuals. The question of how successful the TRC was in shedding light on the systemic dimensions of oppression is an important one.

Graybill's aim in chapter 11 is to tell "the rest of the story" (p. xii). She gives an overview of the TRC's final report findings, an analysis of the vexed issue of reparations, and an account of civil society initiatives to build on the platform established by the TRC. I find the chapter uneven and, inevitably, unable to deliver on its claim. The overview of findings is useful. On reparations, Graybill is well-informed and incisive. But the final section on post-TRC initiatives I find strange. Graybill casts it in terms of work done by "white notables to advance the reconciliatory work of the TRC" (p. 156). Even within these narrow parameters, she covers the ground extremely thinly. And the use of the appellation "white notable" in relation to a number of the organisations and processes cited is hard to justify. However, my primary misgiving with this chapter has to do with what Graybill chooses not to include in "the rest of the story." Let me flag just a few of the issues which I feel are as significant as any which do find space in Graybill's story: internal politics of the TRC; contestation within political parties around the TRC; debates on the TRC as archive, including control over and access to the Commission's records; the question of prosecution for those perpetrators who failed to get amnesty or simply ignored the TRC process; and the connections--in terms of policy and process--between the TRC and other state mechanisms designed to promote reconciliation--for instance, mechanisms for implementing a program of land restitution.

In chapters 12 and 13 Graybill draws in the threads of her story around the central question posed in her book's title--miracle or model? First,

she completes her analytical framework by comparing the transitional model adopted by South Africa with that of Rwanda. I would have liked a broader comparative analysis, or at least an unfolding of the rationale for the selection of Rwanda. Nevertheless, Graybill deftly brings her readers into the final interpretive moves. In my reading there are two. First, the TRC embraces elements of both miracle and model. Second, it does not matter how we choose to label the TRC in these terms. As she concludes: "Whether it was a miracle impossible to duplicate, or a model for other ruptured societies seeking to become whole, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was certainly an extraordinary and unprecedented exercise in healing that will be cited, debated, and held out as an inspiration for as long as people search for ways to live with one another" (p. 179). I concur with this conclusion, but wish that Graybill had attempted to engage some of the other "big" interpretations which have been offered by commentators inside and outside South Africa. For instance, Brent Harris has depicted the TRC as the expression and reinforcement of a particular metanarrative and Jacques Derrida has invited consideration of the TRC as an exercise in forgetting. The questions posed by these interpreters, I would suggest, open more space for exploration than Graybill's narrow miracle/model opposition.

Notwithstanding the limitations I have identified, Graybill's book is finely crafted and bedded in thorough research. It is also, arguably, the most comprehensive account of the TRC to emerge from a burgeoning literature on the subject. As such, it is an excellent introductory text. However, for those who have studied TRC literature, it offers little fresh analysis and does not venture into a number of terrains still begging for attention.

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