

Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa



by Mark Mathabane

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Table of Contents

1. [Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa: Introduction](#)
2. [Mark Mathabane Biography](#)
3. [Summary](#)
4. [Characters](#)
5. [Themes](#)
6. [Style](#)
7. [Historical Context](#)
8. [Critical Overview](#)
9. [Essays and Criticism](#)
10. [Compare and Contrast](#)
11. [Topics for Further Study](#)
12. [Media Adaptations](#)
13. [What Do I Read Next?](#)
14. [Bibliography and Further Reading](#)
15. [Copyright](#)

Introduction

Mark Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* was the first widely published South African autobiography written in English by a black native. Macmillan's initial 1986 American publication stunned readers in much the same way Frederick Douglass's 1845 slave narrative had, forcing many to rethink American support of South African business and government. Earlier,

Mathabane had begun to publish various essays and articles to educate Americans about the horrors of apartheid. When two of his brothers-in-law were shot and killed at point-blank range by a black police officer, he feared that the murders might have been a retaliation to one of his recently published *Newsday* articles. He agonized over the harm his political writing might bring to his family who still remained at home in Alexandra, but he knew that ignoring racial intimidation and violence would not make them go away. In his preface, Mathabane explains that *Kaffir Boy* was his attempt to make the world understand that apartheid had to be abolished because it could not be reformed.

Kaffir is a derogatory name whites use for blacks in South Africa. "The word *Kaffir* is of Arabic origin. It means 'infidel.' In South Africa it is used disparagingly by most whites to refer to blacks. It is the equivalent of the term *nigger*. I was called a 'Kaffir' many times," says Mathabane in an explanatory note that precedes the autobiography.

A chance reading of the book by Oprah Winfrey moved her to buy the film rights and arrange a family reunion with Mathabane and his family as guests on her show. Afterwards, his popularity and literary success skyrocketed. *Kaffir Boy* quickly became a national bestseller, translated into seven languages. Guest appearances on numerous television shows and riveting university lectures soon made Mathabane a sought-after speaker who continued to use words to prick the consciences of his listeners. By the year 2000, he had published four more works of nonfiction. Like *Kaffir Boy*, they too would address mankind's pressing need to abolish—once and for all—racial injustice, child abuse, spouse abuse, alcoholism, illiteracy, poverty, and disease.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Author Biography

Mark Mathabane was born October 18, 1960, in Alexandra, a black ghetto just outside Johannesburg, South Africa. His parents gave him an official Afrikaans name, Johannes, and a tribal name, Thanyani (“the wise one”). As a child, he lived in an unheated two-room shack where the children slept under the kitchen table on makeshift beds of newspaper and cardboard. There was no electricity, no running water, no sewers or indoor toilets. The family suffered from bitter cold and hunger. They lived in constant fear of brutal police raids designed to enforce apartheid (the legalized segregation of blacks and whites) through intimidation and violence. At five, as the caretaker of his younger siblings during his parents' absence, Mathabane was often forced to roam the ghetto for food and an outlet from boredom. Unfortunately, food was scarce, often nonexistent, while boredom could easily, often dangerously, be alleviated. Only his keen intellect and superb athletic abilities enabled him to survive. During the Soweto riots of 1976, he took the name Mark Mathabane (and later, Pierre Mark Mathabane), in order to disguise his identity from the white South African government.

In 1978, Wimbledon champion Stan Smith helped Mathabane secure a tennis scholarship to Limestone College in Gaffney, South Carolina. He later transferred to St. Louis University, Missouri, and then to Quincy College, Illinois, before graduating from Dowling College, New York, in 1983. Inspired by the autobiographies of Richard Wright and Claude Brown, Mathabane began to write his own. Initially published by Macmillan in 1986, *Kaffir Boy* became a nation-wide bestseller, selling more than two hundred thousand copies by 1989. Its translation into seven languages has secured Mathabane's reputation not only as a writer but also as a humanist and public speaker. Recipient of both the 1986 Christopher Award and a 1996–1997 White House Fellowship, Mathabane helped design President Clinton's education initiatives. He was the speaker for the 2001 Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Award and has appeared on numerous television shows. His fifth book, *Miriam's Song*, was short-listed for the 2001 Alan Paton award.

Mathabane has published five works of nonfiction. *Kaffir Boy* is the story of his first eighteen years, growing up under apartheid. *Kaffir Boy in America* relates the story of his college experience and the beginning of his writing career. *Love in Black and White*, co-written with his Caucasian wife, Gail, is the story of their friendship, courtship, and marriage. *African Women* presents the first-person accounts of Mathabane's grandmother, mother, and his sister Florah's experiences living under apartheid. *Miriam's Song* chronicles his sister Miriam's coming of age in Alexandra, South Africa.

Mathabane maintains a web page at <http://www.mathabane.com/index.html> with links to numerous speeches, essays, prefaces, and first chapters of his books—including three recent novels: *Ubuntu*, *The Last Liberal*, and *Deadly Memory*. He is the director of multicultural education at the Catlin Gabel School in Portland, Oregon.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Summary

The Road to Alexandra

Part 1 of *Kaffir Boy* begins in the predawn of a bitterly cold winter day in 1965 with the five-year-old Johannes Mathabane lying awake, terrified by nightmares. After his father leaves for work and his mother for the community outhouse, he finally falls asleep. Within moments, his nightmare becomes reality when Peri-Urban, the Alexandra Police Squad, makes one of its unannounced raids. His mother slips back into the house, awakens Johannes, and engages him in a quiet but frantic search for her passbook (apartheid regulations require that every black person in South Africa carry a document containing his or her photograph, name, address, tribal origin, work and marital status). Once it is found, she again slips out of the house—this time in search of a hiding place. Johannes is left alone with full responsibility for his three-year-old sister and one-year-old brother. The following night Peri-Urban returns, this time raiding the Mathabane home. His mother hides in a small, locked wardrobe, but Johannes is forced to witness his father's emotional emasculation as he is taunted and dragged half-naked out of the house. Along with dozens of others, he is handcuffed, taken away in a convoy of trucks, and forced to spend two months doing hard labor on a white man's potato farm for his past crimes—all because he could not afford to pay his poll tax or his tribal tax, nor did he have the money to bribe the police officer. In 1966, Johannes's father is once again arrested—this time for unemployment—and imprisoned for almost a year.

During his father's absence, Johannes's mother struggles to keep her family fed but can only afford one meager meal a day. When the landlord threatens to evict her, she appeals to her mother for money to pay the rent. After the money runs out, she secures a weekend job doing housecleaning and laundry. At six each morning, she takes her three children to area garbage dumps. There she and the children forage for food and other items they cannot afford: clothes, knives, furniture, and kitchen utensils. Still, gnawing hunger remains Johannes's constant companion, leading him into more and more dangerous situations. He begins stealing liquor bottles and reselling them to the owners, using the money for food and tickets to the movies. When he realizes that his mother is pregnant with her fourth child, he tells her that she should not have had him, that he is "not happy in this world." "It will get better," she tells him, but from his viewpoint it doesn't. Soon, he is hanging out with other six- and seven-year-olds, many of whom are homeless. He innocently accepts an invitation from a thirteen-year-old pimp, Mpandhlani, to earn money and all the food he can eat. However, he runs away in horror, vowing never to tell anyone what he has seen once he realizes that the invitation requires that he become a prostitute for male migrant workers.

Jackson Mathabane returns from prison a bitterly abusive man who uses most of his earnings to buy alcohol. He violently forces his children to follow the tribal rituals of his childhood, even taking Johannes on a trip back to his Venda homeland. Despite his experiences growing up in Alexandra, Johannes is surprised by the

primitive conditions and his father's visit to the local witch doctor. "The fact that he willingly, without question or protest, submitted to the witch doctor's rituals made him a stranger to me," says Johannes. "It somehow seemed unwholesome." When his mother had earlier had all of her children baptized in the Christian faith, Johannes responded with a similar skepticism to the church's portraits of God and the devil. The former depicted God "as an old blue-eyed white man," whereas the latter "portrayed a naked black man, his features distorted to resemble the devil with a tail." On the other hand, his mother's nighttime stories, riddles, proverbs, animal fables, tribal folklore, and songs "served as a kind of library, a golden fountain of knowledge" from which the children learn "about right and wrong, about good and evil." Determined that her son will be educated, his mother gets him up at four o'clock on three separate mornings and stands in line for hours, waiting to get the birth certificate required for school enrollment.

Passport to Knowledge

Part 2 begins in the predawn of another winter day two years later when Johannes's mother awakens him and forces him to bathe and dress in his father's shirt and pants, folding and tucking them to fit. His mother and grandmother have to tie his hands together and lead him against his will to the Shangaan tribal school. He returns home at the end of a horrendous first day only to discover that his father has brutally beaten his mother for enrolling him in school. When he realizes not only why education is so important to his mother but also what she is willing to endure to secure her son's education, Johannes agrees to stay in school. His father's refusal to pay his school expenses results in Johannes being beaten daily for not wearing a school uniform or having the required textbooks. However, he continues to go to school and to excel, achieving the highest marks in his class. The physical abuse from daily beatings and his chance witnessing of a brutal murder at age ten leave Johannes despondent and suicidal. His mother, finding him with a knife, appeals to his conscience. Forcing him to look at his sisters, she asks what would happen to them without an older brother to protect them. "I too would want to die if you were to die. You're the only hope I have. I love you very much," she tells him. "Now give me that knife," and he does.

Pregnant with her fifth child, Johannes's mother takes a cleaning job to pay his school expenses, and he continues to stay in school, remaining at the top of his class through Standard Six. His educational success results not only from a keen mind and diligent study but also from the generosity of Mrs. Smith, one of his grandmother's employers, who sends him her son's old clothes, books, and toys—thereby broadening his education. After Granny secures permission to bring Johannes with her as a helper, Mrs. Smith's generosity continues, making it possible for Johannes to read classic English novels that are not part of his school curriculum. She also gives him an old tennis racket, initiating his involvement in the sport.

Passport to Freedom

Johannes's life begins to revolve almost entirely around school, reading, and tennis. He earns a First Class pass on his final Standard Six exams and is awarded a government scholarship to pay for all three years of his secondary schooling. In 1972, Johannes enrolls in the local Alexandra Secondary School. Once again he is an excellent student, leading the Form One classes in final exams and becoming the number one tennis player. In June of 1973, Tom, a fellow teammate, sets up an interview for Johannes with Wilfred Horn who runs Barretts Tennis Ranch. An employee at the all-white facility, Tom has played tennis against numerous whites. Uneasy about the repercussions of moving into the white world, Johannes introduces himself to Horn as "Mark Mathabane" and begins working and playing tennis at the ranch. In November of 1973, Horn buys Mathabane a ticket to see Arthur Ashe play at Ellis Park. In 1974, Mathabane wins his first tennis championship. In June of 1975, he represents the southern Transvaal black junior tennis squad in the National Tournament in Pretoria. In the spring of 1976, Mathabane wins a matriculation and university scholarship from Simba Quix. In June, when black student-initiated Soweto protests spread to Alexandra, Mathabane enters the burning school library to rescue books. In 1977, he enters the South African Breweries Open, gets banned from black tennis for life, and meets Wimbledon Champion Stan Smith. Smith and his wife Marjory help Mathabane get a tennis scholarship to an American college. On September 16, 1978, he boards a plane for the United States, armed with a student visa, his passport to freedom.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Characters

Arthur Ashe

An American, Arthur Ashe was the first black male to win at Wimbledon. His South African match with Jimmy Connors fuels Mathabane's dream of becoming a great tennis player. Even though Ashe loses the South African match to Connors, he provides Mathabane with evidence that blacks can succeed not only in the game of tennis but also in breaking long-standing racial barriers. Ashe becomes Mathabane's role model and his inspiration.

Aunt Bushy

Aunt Bushy is Granny's teenage daughter who still lives at home with her mother. She pays for her nephew Johannes's school trips and gives him lunch money on a regular basis.

Granny

Granny is Mathabane's maternal grandmother. "Her genial brown eyes had the radiance of pristine pearls. She was, I think, the most beautiful black woman I ever saw," says Mathabane. An excellent and experienced gardener, she is forced to raise her children alone after her husband leaves her for another woman. She works ten hours a day, six days a week, for white families in Johannesburg. She is a tower of strength to her daughter and her grandchildren, opening her home as a refuge from Jackson Mathabane's abuse. Most important, it is Granny who secures work for the eleven-year-old Johannes with the Smiths of Johannesburg. With her, he makes his first trip into the city and the unknown world of white wealth. There he is introduced both to the game of tennis and to the world of books and literature.

Wilfred Horn

Horn is a German immigrant who runs a tennis ranch for whites who are training to become professionals. After learning about the ranch from one of his teammates, Mathabane requests an interview with Horn who invites him to participate in matches at the ranch. For the first time, Johannes is not only able to practice and play tennis with athletes of superior caliber but also to compete with and establish friendships with whites. The year is 1973. Realizing that there could be serious repercussions from white South African officials if they discover that he, a black athlete, is playing tennis with white athletes, he gives his name as Mark Mathabane rather than Johannes—probably in an attempt to disguise his true identity from apartheid officials.

Dinah Mathabane

Dinah is the sixth of the seven Mathabane children and Johannes's fourth sister.

Florah Mathabane

Florah is the second of the seven Mathabane children and Johannes's first sister. She is only three when the autobiography begins and shares a cardboard bed under the kitchen table with her five-year-old brother. He is expected to look after her when their parents are out of the house and to keep her quiet during police raids when his parents hide or flee the house for their safety.

George Mathabane

George is the third of the seven Mathabane children and Johannes's only brother. He is only one when the autobiography begins. As with Florah, Johannes is expected to look after George when their parents are unable to.

Johannes Mathabane

See Mark Mathabane

Linah Mathabane

Linah is the youngest of the seven Mathabane children and Johannes's fifth sister.

Mama Mathabane

Mama is Mathabane's mother. Her given name never appears in the story. Originally from Gazankulu, the tribal reserve of the Tsongas, she is married to Jackson, a man twenty years her senior. Although they are legally married, the white apartheid government does not accept their marriage, forcing them to hide or escape from the police who make surprise night raids on the homes in Alexandra. Despite Jackson's abuse, she cannot leave him because her father has already spent the bride price he paid for her. A "mesmerizing storyteller," her "stories served as a kind of library, a golden fountain of knowledge where we children learned about right and wrong, about good and evil," says Mathabane. Determined that Johannes will have an education, she wakes him at 4:00 A.M. on three separate mornings to walk long distances and then stand in line for hours to get a birth certificate that will permit him to attend school. Pregnant with her fifth child, she secures a cleaning job in order to help pay school expenses. Her determination keeps him in school. Her values, instilled through her nightly storytelling, shape the humanitarian and writer he becomes. She is the heart and soul of the family.

Maria Mathabane

Maria is the fourth of the seven Mathabane children and Johannes's second sister.

Mark Mathabane

Mark Mathabane is both the author and narrator of *Kaffir Boy*. Johannes is the Afrikaans name Mark Mathabane's parents give him at birth. At the beginning of the story, he is a cold, hungry, frightened, five-year-old, at the mercy of the Alexandra police raids. By the end of the story, he has finished secondary school at the top of his class, secured a banking job with a decent salary, won a tennis championship, and received a scholarship to an American college. He can speak, read, and write in several languages.

In 1973, when he meets with Wilfred Horn to request permission to play tennis at his all-white camp, "for some reason," Mathabane says, "I gave my name as Mark." Perhaps he was already trying to weaken the paper trail that would lead to Johannes Mathabane and get him into trouble with white South Africans who were not as liberal as Horn. In his 1994 book *African Women*, Mathabane's sister Florah explains that Johannes took the name Mark in 1976 during the student protests in Soweto. Clearly, this was an attempt to hide his identity from the police.

Without his mother's refusal to give up, without her persistence in obtaining his birth certificate, her talking him out of suicide, her willingness to work as a housecleaner, her love and faith, he might not have made it. From her, he says, "I learned that virtues are things to be always striven after, embraced and cultivated, for they are amply rewarded." I realized "that vices were bad things, to be avoided at all cost, for they bring one nothing but trouble and punishment."

Merriam Mathabane

Merriam is the fifth of the seven Mathabane children and Johannes's third sister.

Papa Mathabane

Mathabane's name for his father, Jackson Mathabane, whom he describes as a "short, gaunt figure, with a smooth, tight, black-as-coal skin," and "large prominent jaws." The "sole function" of his "thin, uneven lips" appears to be "the production of sneers." Other "fearsome features" include a "broad nose with slightly flaring nostrils, small, bloodshot eyes which never cried, small, close-set ears, and a wide, prominent forehead." "Born and bred" in the tribal reserve of the Vendas, he rules his house according to tribal law, "tolerating no deviance." An uneducated laborer, who paid lobola (a bride price) for his wife, he views her and their children

as his property. He is a "tough, resolute and absolute ruler of the house," who expects complete obedience from both wife and children, often using physical abuse to enforce his will. Emasculated by apartheid regulations, imprisonment, and mistreatment, he gradually sinks into a life of alcoholic bitterness.

Mpandhlani

Mpandhlani is a homeless, thirteen-year-old gang member who represents one of the worst aspects of victimization in the system of apartheid. He recruits prostitutes for male migrant workers who have been separated from their wives and children and forced to live in all-male dormitories. They pay Mpandhlani to lure innocent boys to the dormitories with the promise of food and money. A hungry Johannes almost falls victim to the lure, but his mother's teachings and wisdom enable him to recognize that something about the situation is not right. He refuses the food he is offered and manages to escape when the other boys begin to undress. He sees what is about to happen and literally runs for his life, vowing never to tell anyone what he has seen. The adult Mathabane, looking back on the incident as narrator, realizes that what was too horrible for him to comprehend as a boy was callously accepted as commonplace by white officials, who simply turned a blind eye.

Peri-Urban

Peri-Urban is the Alexandra police squad that terrorizes, abuses, and arrests residents with no warning and often without cause. They drag Johannes's father half-naked from his bed, handcuff him, and throw him in a truck. For two months, he is forced to work on a white man's potato farm. After a second arrest and a year spent in prison, Jackson Mathabane returns home a bitter, abusive man. Peri-Urban is responsible for Johannes's belief that white people are the devil.

Uncle Piet

Piet is Granny's teenage son who enables Johannes to stay in school by buying him necessary clothing.

Sacaramouche

A self-employed painter and excellent tennis coach, Sacaramouche is "one of the best tennis players among people of colour in Johannesburg." After seeing Johannes hitting tennis balls against a stadium wall, he voluntarily becomes his first tennis coach and mentor, enabling him to polish and hone his game. Two and a half years later, Mathabane wins his first tennis championship, the Alexandra Open, thus becoming one of the most outstanding young black tennis players in South Africa.

Clyde Smith

Clyde is the Smiths' (those whom Mathabane's Granny works for) son whose racist taunting challenges the eleven-year-old Mark to prove that he is as capable as any white person. "I vowed that, whatever the cost, I would master English, that I would not rest till I could read, write and speak it just like any white man, if not better. Finally I had something to aspire to."

Stan Smith

Stan Smith is the Wimbledon tennis champion who befriends Mathabane during a tennis tournament in South Africa. After returning to the states, Smith begins a correspondence with Mark that leads to a full tennis scholarship at Limestone College in South Carolina. His friendship and financial support make it possible for Mathabane to escape the ghetto and pursue his dreams in America.

The Smiths

The Smiths are a white family who employ Granny as a gardener. They live in "Rosebank, one of Johannesburg's posh whites-only suburbs." They give Johannes their son Clyde's old comic books, toys, games, and storybooks like *Aesop's Fables* and *Pinocchio*. "These books and toys revealed to me a new reality," says Mathabane. "They moulded my thoughts and feelings and made me dream. My interest in learning increased." Mrs. Smith also gave Johannes an old wooden tennis racket. "Practise hard, for one day I

want to read about you in the papers, as our next Arthur Ashe," she challenges him.

Tsotsis

Tsotsis are hoodlums and gang members that roam Alexandra. When Johannes unwittingly witnesses a group of them committing a brutal murder, he is so devastated by the act and the world he lives in that he seriously considers suicide. At the age of ten, he sees no reason to continue living.

A White Nun

A white nun is the first admirable, trustworthy white person in Mathabane's experience. She helps Johannes's mother obtain his birth certificate so that he can attend school. The nun's willingness to cut through the red tape designed to prevent blacks from gaining an education, to stand for him and his mother against a white person, convinces the young Johannes that all whites are not devils.

Mr. Wilde

A senior manager at Simba Quix, the largest potato chip and rusks company in South Africa, he presents Johannes with a scholarship in recognition of his academic excellence in his three years in secondary school. The scholarship pays for all of Johannes's school expenses and provides him with summer employment as well.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Themes

Abuse of Power

Kaffir Boy is a searing indictment against South Africa's National Party's bigoted and unethical abuse of power. When the party won the 1948 election based on their promise to legalize apartheid (racial separation of blacks and whites), the minority white population thus became the lawgivers, restricting living areas, schools, medical resources, and movement of the majority black population to specifically designated ghettos outside the city of Johannesburg. Blacks could not leave their homes without passes containing a photograph, address, marital information, and employment status. Mathabane and his family, like all other blacks in South Africa, became victims of a racially abusive system that continued in power until the early nineties.

Equal Opportunity

The lack of equal opportunity is graphically portrayed in *Kaffir Boy*. Jackson Mathabane is arrested and imprisoned for being temporarily unemployed. While he is in prison, his wife and children, unable to afford food, go every morning to garbage dumps on the outskirts of the ghetto to scavenge for food. They get up early in order to be the first ones there when the garbage trucks arrive from Johannesburg because they know that there will be large quantities of food that have been thrown away by wealthy whites who live in posh neighborhoods. They also discover practically new clothing, furniture, cooking utensils, and other useful objects that are still in excellent condition—objects that they cannot afford to buy.

The contrast between the opportunities open to blacks and those open to whites is further portrayed in the visits of Mathabane and Granny to the Smiths' home in Johannesburg. The three-member Smith family lives in a house that is ten times the size of that of the nine-member Mathabane family. The Smith home has central heat and air, running water, and bedrooms in which no one sleeps. The Mathabane home is made of thin materials that offer little protection against wind, rain, cold, or heat. It has only two rooms and no indoor plumbing. Games, books, clothes, and toys that Clyde Smith carelessly discards are rich treasures to Mathabane.

Gender Equality

Another important theme in *Kaffir Boy* is that of gender equality. Tribal custom views daughters as far more valuable than sons because men must pay the father *lobola* (a bride price) to secure a wife and children. As a result, both wives and daughters are often treated more like property than like human beings. Despite her husband's abuse, Mathabane's mother is trapped in her marriage not only because her father has already spent the bride price Jackson paid for her but also because she will not abandon her daughters to their father's treatment.

Victims and Victimization

For many, the term "victim" connotes a helpless person that has become an object for some other person or disease to abuse. In *Kaffir Boy*, Mathabane's mother and father, by contrast, prove that connotation false. Jackson Mathabane has been so horribly victimized and emasculated by apartheid that he allows alcohol and bitterness to turn him into a victimizer, abusing his wife and children. On the other hand, Mathabane's mother refuses to be a victim. She stands up to her husband on issues that matter and seeks the asylum of her mother's house when it becomes necessary. She uses her love and her wisdom to pull her ten-year-old son back from suicide, teaching him that the will to survive, the refusal to give in to the victimizer, can transform a would-be victim into a winner.

The Value of Education

Kaffir Boy's single most important theme is the value of education. Knowing that her actions will likely result in a severe beating from her husband, Mathabane's mother still enrolls her son in school and takes the consequences. Because she believes that education is the key that will open up a new world and a new life for her son, she will risk anything to give him that key. She knows that knowledge bestows power, instills values, and equips one with the weapons necessary to fight injustice. She believes that it will liberate her son from the prison house of poverty, and it does. "My love for reading removed me from the streets," says Mathabane. It also removed him from the ghetto into a life of learning, writing, and teaching in the United States.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Style

Setting

Kaffir Boy takes place in the country of South Africa, primarily in Alexandra, a black ghetto just outside the city of Johannesburg. A shantytown containing shacks made mostly of flimsy wood and cardboard, the one-square-mile ghetto housed a population of over one hundred thousand non-whites. Potholes often rendered its twenty-three dirt streets impassable. There were no sewers, no indoor plumbing, and no electricity in most of the shacks. Everyone shared the community outhouses and water source. Indians, "the cream of Alexandra's quarantined society," lived on First Avenue behind their shops. Second, Third, and Fourth Avenue were inhabited by The Coloureds, a mixed race resulting from the 1652 "arrival of white settlers in Africa without women." The remainder of the ghetto was occupied by full-blooded Africans, whom Mathabane describes as "black as coal."

The novel's action covers the first eighteen years of Mathabane's life from 1960 to 1978—eighteen years that fall roughly in the middle of the long rule of apartheid. Instituted in 1948, it would continue in force until the early 1990s. For over forty years, this white, minority-enforced system legalized the forced separation of residential communities, public transportation, education, and social institutions—including religion and marriage. All non-whites were forced to secure and carry permits that identified both their tribal origin and their current work, home, and marital status. They were forced to reside in Bantu (non-white) locations. Work permits and passes were necessary for securing any kind of employment. Even with a work pass, movement in

white neighborhoods was restricted to daylight hours unless the pass specified that the carrier was employed in the residence or business after daylight hours. Neglect or failure to carry an up-to-date pass often resulted in unpaid, forced labor on white farms or imprisonment.

First-Person Point of View

First-person viewpoint is, of course, the norm in autobiography. In *Kaffir Boy*, however, Mathabane skillfully juxtaposes the voices of Mark Mathabane, the adult author, with the developing voices of Johannes, the child, and Mark, the politically savvy teenager. In chapter 1, for instance, the adult author begins his story with the full text of the legal warning posted on every road into the ghetto of Alexandra—a warning deliberately designed to prevent whites from entering the black world. Thus, most white South Africans remain ignorant of how blacks are forced to live, because the forced segregation allows them to believe what they want to believe and to turn a blind eye to the true conditions apartheid not only creates but also enforces daily. "The white man of South Africa certainly does not know me," Mathabane challenges and then dares the white man to ignore the warnings and enter the black world through his story, to feel vicariously what he felt each time a white called him a "Kaffir Boy" (a term equivalent to that of *nigger*).

Chapter 2 opens in a predawn nightmare world with five-year-old Johannes hysterically narrating being awakened from a dream of black people lying dead in pools of blood. Almost immediately, the nightmare turns to reality when his father leaves for work and his mother flees the house in search of a hiding place. Readers, like Johannes, remain at the mercy of Peri-Urban (the Alexandra police squad that terrorizes, abuses, and arrests residents with no warning and often without cause.) Forced to experience the real world of apartheid vicariously, they can no longer ignore or deny the facts. They must confront the evils of apartheid head-on.

Most important, first-person point of view not only gives immediacy and validity to Mathabane's experiences growing up under apartheid but also models the values crucial to his physical and spiritual survival: his mother's tenacious support and will, his own pursuit of education, his determination to succeed in tennis, and the friendship of others.

Tone and Mood

The tone of *Kaffir Boy* takes the reader on a roller coaster ride of severe drops, wild curves, and steep climbs relieved by very few level straightaways. At times ironic or didactic, it moves rapidly from fear, to reassurance, to anger, to despondency, to determination, to hope, to disappointment, to despair, to elation. The resulting mood changes provide readers with a real sense of having walked in Mathabane's shoes, forcing them to confront head-on the evils of apartheid and other forms of racism.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Historical Context

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism—sometimes referred to as Postcolonial Studies or Postcolonial Criticism—is variously defined by different critics and literary professors. However, the terms are most frequently used to refer to the interaction with and influences of European nations upon non-European peoples and their countries. As an autobiography written by an African native whose people are governed by white descendants of European nations, *Kaffir Boy* belongs to this literary/historical movement. Its themes are in many ways similar to those of other postcolonial writers: abuse of power, victimization, racial injustice, inequality, oppression of the majority by the minority, poverty, and violence. In his preface to the autobiography, Mathabane explains that his two-fold purpose is to persuade "the rest of the world" that apartheid has to be "abolished" because it

cannot be "reformed" and also to explain that he "had to reject the tribal traditions" of his ancestors "in order to escape."

Apartheid and Literature

Although racial injustice has existed throughout history, South Africa's over-forty-year legalization of racial abuse under apartheid stands out as one of the most horrific examples in modern history. It is therefore not surprising that it would become the subject matter for a vast number of South African writers, both black and white. Some, like Bessie Head and Mathabane, would write while in exile or abroad, but many would write from within the country itself. In 1987, just a year after the publication of *Kaffir Boy*, Northwestern University's *TriQuarterly* magazine published over forty selections of "new" writing by South Africans. In 1991, Nadine Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. In 1988, J. M. Coetzee won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Life and Times of Michael K*. In 1991, he won the Booker again for his novel *Disgrace*, thus earning the distinction of being the only person to win the Booker twice. Regardless of genre, however, almost all South African writing—from autobiography, to essay, to novel, to drama, to short story, to poetry—is in some way both autobiographical and political. Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy* is no exception.

Apartheid and History

Mathabane's preface makes it clear that his purpose is political. As a boy, he heard again and again how whites opened fire on sixty-nine unarmed black protesters on March 21, 1960. The fact that his birth and the Sharpsville Massacre occurred in the same year deeply influenced his childhood belief that all whites were devils. Daily experience with multiple instances of racial injustice and abuse finally culminated in his involvement in the Soweto student uprisings of 1976. When the Department of Bantu Education decreed that all black children would be forced to speak and read Afrikaans rather than English, students rebelled, torching the schools. The protests spread rapidly to Alexandra, turning the poverty-stricken ghetto into chaos. Horrified to discover that his local school library had been torched, Mathabane entered the burning building to rescue books. At sixteen, he realized that his only "passport" out of the ghetto was education. Saving the books meant saving himself. Writing the autobiography was an attempt to save those who still remained imprisoned by apartheid.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Critical Overview

Initial reviews of *Kaffir Boy* in the spring of 1986 were mixed. *New York Times Book Review* critic Lillian Thomas appeared either unable or unwilling to grasp the significance of the book, suggesting that it should have been written in a different way and questioning why the author was no longer living in South Africa. Two other critics, whose reviews appeared in the same month as Thomas's, praised the uniqueness and power of the book. Both Charles R. Larson in the *Washington Post Book World* and Diane Manuel in the *Chicago Tribune Book World* commented on its uniqueness as an autobiography written in English by a black native who had actually lived in an apartheid-ruled South African ghetto. Larson believed that *Kaffir Boy* "might acquire the same status that Richard Wright's *Black Boy* or Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* had for earlier American readers." For him, *Kaffir Boy* was "in every way as important and as exciting a book." Manuel called it a "rare" book. "What television newscasts did to expose the horrors of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, books like *Kaffir Boy* may well do for the horrors of apartheid in the 1980s," she said.

Despite mixed reviews, just a few months after *Kaffir Boy*'s initial publication, Readers' Digest Condensed Books purchased the condensation rights and New American Library bought the paperback rights. Dave Grogan's favorable story in *People* and an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1987 brought the autobiography to the attention of a wider audience. It became an almost overnight bestseller, reaching third

place on the *New York Times* bestseller list and first place on the *Washington Post* bestseller list. Its importance as the seminal autobiography of black experience in apartheid-ruled South Africa remains unquestioned. Textbook companies and school systems throughout the United States include it in their standard high school curricula.

Unfortunately, like other books that dare to address racial injustice and abuse, *Kaffir Boy* has been banned by some parent groups and school systems who find the book inappropriate because of one scene. Ironically, the scene in question is crucial not only to Mathabane's survival but also for his readers to be able to understand just how warped and destructive apartheid is. It separates men from their wives and children and forces them to live hundreds of miles away in all-male barracks. Victims themselves, some of these men turn young, starving boys in the nearby ghetto into prostitutes in exchange for money and food. A starving Mathabane includes the story of being solicited by the promise of food, his horror when he begins to realize what is about to happen, and his successful flight from the barracks in time to prevent becoming a victim. The story not only forces readers to see how corrupt and horrible apartheid is but also warns readers, young and old, of the need to be wary of promises that sound too good to be true, to realize that ignorance often leads to victimization.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Essays and Criticism

1. [Kaffir Boy: A Significant Postcolonial Work](#)
2. [Mathabane's Unshakeable Hope in a Harsh World](#)
3. [The Reality of South African Apartheid](#)

Kaffir Boy: A Significant Postcolonial Work

In this essay, Lois Carson discusses *Kaffir Boy* in relation to both postcolonialism and other South African literary biographies.

Postcolonial studies and literary criticism examine twentieth century political and social issues resulting from interactions between European nations and the peoples they colonized. Of special concern are humanitarian issues, particularly disparities in the treatment and living conditions between the native peoples and the colonizers who have raped the natural resources and wealth for themselves. Displacement and loss of traditional value systems and inequities in land ownership have created volatile, racial imbalance between the majority black populations and white minority legal structure. In South Africa, for instance, the Native Land Act of 1913 reserved only 13 percent of its land for Africans who made up 80 percent of the population. As more and more natives fled to cities like Johannesburg in search of jobs, frightened white political leaders established apartheid, turning their already discriminatory practices into legal injustice. *Kaffir Boy* takes place in the apartheid-ruled black ghetto of Alexandra.

The autobiography's primary purpose is political. Mathabane's intention is to expose the horrors of apartheid and its violent, legally enforced racism to the rest of the world, and he succeeds. *Kaffir Boy* provides clear evidence that apartheid has to be abolished. Choosing autobiography as his form is a masterstroke. A short story or novel would have brought the story to a western audience. However, neither would have had the same validity and power as his own true-life experience, especially given the risk to him and to family members who remained in Alexandra. Its 1986 American publication came just a year after pressure from anti-apartheid groups led Congress to match Reagan's mild package of sanctions with a bill calling for a wide

range of restrictions on American trade and investment in South Africa. As the first autobiography by a South African native, written in English and published in the west, it played a significant role in enlightening the international community, drawing its citizens into the impoverished ghetto of Alexandra.

The autobiography succeeds in part because of Mathabane's innovative handling of his subject matter. Chapter 1 opens with the first-person expository voice of the adult Mathabane reminding readers that they enter a Bantu (non-white) area at their own risk and are subject to arrest, fines, and imprisonment without a pass. Chapter 2 abruptly forces the reader into the nightmare world of the five-year-old Mathabane who must act as surrogate parent to his younger brother and sister in the midst of a pre-dawn police raid. Succeeding chapters and their events are narrated exclusively by Mathabane, but the voice changes from that of a frightened five-year-old to a suicidal ten-year-old, to a savvy teenager, to an anxious young adult, quietly desperate to escape. As the voice changes in accordance with the experiences apartheid forces on Mathabane, so does the frenetic, often hopeless tone. The resulting mood creates a similar experience for the reader.

Mathabane's first-person point of view is equally important in delineating character and themes. Though he gives his readers the names of each of his six siblings and his father, his mother, who is the central figure both in Mathabane's own life and in much of the autobiography, is identified only as Mama. Having been denied an education because she is a female, Mathabane's mother goes to great sacrifice to ensure his getting one. Illiterate and thus with no access to books and schooling, she creates an oral library with her "riveting stories" culled from tribal traditions, riddles, songs, and folktales. With these and her mesmerizing acting ability, she arms her children with life-saving values: "strive after virtues," "avoid vices at all cost," "prefer peace to war, cleverness to stupidity, love to hate ... harmony to strife, patience to rashness." She willingly endures long lines, bureaucratic inefficiency, Mathabane's own rebellion, and, ultimately, physical abuse from her husband, in order to attain a birth certificate and enroll Mathabane in school. Her actions not only make it possible for Mathabane to survive his years in the ghetto but also to escape to freedom in the United States.

Unlike his wife, Jackson Mathabane is a negative character, a human being reduced to an abusive husband and father, as a result of psychological emasculation at the hands of the South African police. He is convinced that the South African white political structure will ultimately force all blacks to return to their tribal reserves. Opposed to education, which he perceives as useless, he forces his children and wife to perform tribal rituals. For Mathabane he is a symbol not only of a lost heritage but of what he too is likely to become if he remains in Alexandra.

Perhaps, the most significant function of Mathabane's first-person voice is the immediacy and suspenseful pacing it gives to the horrors and pitfalls awaiting children growing up in Alexandra. With Mathabane, readers are forced to stave off hunger with soup consisting of nothing but boiled cow's blood. Still starving, they accept an invitation to earn money and food only to run away in horror when they realize that the price is prostituting themselves to male migrant workers. Having escaped becoming a victim, they can't escape the knowledge that other children have already become victims and that still others will be victimized in the future. At barely ten years of age, having endured more than the psyche can handle, they are rescued from suicide by a mother's wisdom and love.

Mathabane's setting provides readers with a still broader view of the inequities in living conditions resulting from over three hundred years of European involvement in South Africa. He varies location and place to dramatize the vast contrasts between the lives of urban whites and the lives of rural and urban blacks. The majority of the action takes place in the one-square-mile, black ghetto of Alexandra where Mathabane spent his first eighteen years. Its one hundred thousand residents have no electricity, running water, or sewers. Most live in poorly constructed one- to two-room shacks. However, a few scenes take place in the posh, white residential section of Johannesburg where Mathabane's grandmother works as a gardener. Several other scenes take the readers to a trash dump where a starving Mathabane, his mother, and his siblings rake through garbage from Johannesburg in search of food, clothing, and furniture. (When Mathabane finds a dead human

baby wrapped in newspapers, the trips to the trash dump end.) Another scene takes place in Mathabane's father's tribal homeland where the soil has been rendered so sterile from inefficient farming that Mathabane calls it a wasteland. Others take place at a tennis camp for wealthy whites, and at Ellis Park, site of the South African Brewery tennis competitions that draw top tennis players from all over the world. The brutal inequities between the living conditions and advantages of blacks and those of whites are inescapable.

One might argue that the autobiography's setting is too large and sprawling, attempting to cover too many years and too many events, that its political purpose could have been better achieved by omitting some of the events, especially in the third section. It is true that the political logistics involved in professional tennis competition lack the immediacy and drama of the earlier two sections. However, they offer us a different picture of Mathabane, allowing us to experience vicariously what it is like to be used as a pawn by the whites only to be banned for life from black tennis competition in South Africa. While not as vividly or gruesomely riveting as eating worms or soup made of cows' blood, this third section clearly delineates the extent to which apartheid laws, politics, and big business control every aspect of life in South Africa. They clearly leave Mathabane with no choice but to find a peaceful, safe, and expeditious way to leave the country.

In 1973, critic James Olney observed that "one consequence of apartheid is that South Africa has produced a number of writers and an equal number of literary autobiographies, often in exile." *Kaffir Boy* adds still another to the existing number, attesting to the healing power of literature and its creation. As such, it is a significant postcolonial work. Its universal themes are broad and many. Like almost all early literary biographies, however, it too demonstrates the liberating power of education and the debt all societies owe to the creative artist.

Source: Lois Carson, Critical Essay on *Kaffir Boy*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002. Carson is an instructor of English literature and composition.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Mathabane's Unshakeable Hope in a Harsh World

In the following essay, Pamela Steed Hill examines the brutal existence that Mathabane survived, the honesty with which he recounts it, and the incredible hope he maintained in the face of such atrocities.

When Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* was published in America in 1986, most, if not all, of those who read it could not begin to identify with the horrors it describes, and it is safe to assume that many could not even fully comprehend them. The brutality, persecution, filth, and unending perils of day-to-day living were too much for some readers to take, too much for some to believe. Yes, there is abject poverty and degrading living environments in America, and, yes, racism still abounds in many areas, regardless of the laws against it. There are sociologists, politicians, teachers, and parents alike who claim that black children do not have the same opportunities to a good education that white children have in America, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And there are those who point out that several of the health problems encountered by blacks and other minority groups are largely due to their limited access to good health care, whether because of its high cost or because of a more debilitating, systematic denial rooted in racist programs and policies. None of these legitimate concerns will be argued here, and no doubt will be cast on the sorrowful living conditions that thousands of America's desperately poor endure every minute of every day. Given that, *Kaffir Boy* depicts a life that even the most destitute families in the free world may find shocking and unbearable.

It is commonly assumed that an individual does not miss what he or she has never had—that if one grows up in the city, then country life is not "missed," or if one is raised on Chinese cuisine, then Italian is not missed, and so forth. This simplified analogy, of course, does not account for the typical human desire to try new things, eat different foods, and live in a myriad of settings that many people experience over their lifetimes; the point, rather, is that human beings must initially accept what they are given, what they are born into. Perhaps this is the only feasible explanation—suspect as it is—that the Mathabanes of the world manage to survive childhood and adolescence and move into their adult lives without ever having known what it was like to grab a snack from a refrigerator, to turn on a television, to hang out with friends without being beaten by the police, to take a shower, to flush a toilet, to sleep in a real bed, and to go to that bed without hunger pangs and rat bites. All these seemingly simple actions would have been luxuries for Mathabane and his family and all the people of the Alexandra ghetto. But they were luxuries the black South Africans never knew, and still they survived—except, of course, for those who were murdered or died of malnutrition and untreated diseases, daily occurrences in Alexandra.

Consider the opposite scenario: take a child, nine or ten years old (or even younger), who has grown up in a relatively "normal" American household and put him in Mathabane's place. How will he fare when the only way to keep from starving to death is to eat fried locusts and worms and a thick soup made from boiled cow's blood? What will he do when his teachers beat him savagely with canes for not having a proper school uniform or not being able to pay school fees? Who will he rely on when his parents are dragged naked from their two-room shack in the middle of the night, arrested and mauled by the authorities, along with dozens of other blacks, for not having their "passes" in order? Will he simply get used to the weekly police raids and, after watching for a while, return to his urine-stained, bug-infested piece of cardboard beneath the kitchen table that he calls a *bed*?

Many people who have never experienced the inhumane conditions of life under a ruthless, oppressive system of law still claim to understand what it must be like to live that way and to sympathize with the victims. White Americans commiserate with the plight of blacks during the days of slavery, and non-Jews everywhere believe they comprehend the horrors of anti-Semitism during the Holocaust. Rich people feel compassion for the poor and healthy people think they know what being terminally ill must feel like. While all these emotions and beliefs may be heart-felt and well-intended, one individual can never really *know* the suffering of another unless he or she has personally experienced it. Readers of *Kaffir Boy* who have not lived as a black person in apartheid South Africa cannot really *feel* that existence. What an outsider can do, however, is get as close to it as possible through the brutal, no-holds-barred autobiography of a young man who knew nothing else for the first eighteen years of his life.

If Mathabane had written his account in more general terms, in the vague language of newspaper stories or impersonal observations, *Kaffir Boy* could not land the same shocking blows to naïve readers as it actually does. Words like *poverty*, *racism*, *oppression*, *police raids*, *starvation*, *brutality*, and countless others all fall short of a true description of ghetto life under apartheid. But in telling his story, Mathabane goes far beyond a benign idiom to express the graphic, honest details of day-to-day—sometimes hour-by-hour—living in Johannesburg's most notorious slum. Readers with weak stomachs may have difficulty with the physical realities of having no indoor plumbing. Children are not allowed to use the public outhouse without adult supervision, so they often relieve themselves in the alleyways. Human waste runs through the streets where people walk barefoot and sit on sidewalks. When they return to their shacks, there is no running water, so bathing is not an easy option. Hunger forces Mathabane and his siblings to taste their own nasal mucous, and their grandmother blows her nose into her palms and rubs them together—self-made hand lotion. Some boys in the ghetto offer themselves sexually to older men in exchange for a decent meal, and young girls learn early that their purpose in life is to produce babies for husbands who "own" them. Grotesque details such as these proliferate throughout *Kaffir Boy*, and their effect is undeniable. Stupefying and repulsive, yes, but also sobering and educating.

Perhaps there are those who find Mathabane's candid reporting unwarranted or even offensive, but those are likely the ones who need to read it most. When one tries to imagine what it is like to live as the victim of an oppressive government, some cruel atrocities may come to mind, yet pictures of the most despicable actions forced upon the victims are probably not among them. Mathabane does not let the reader escape. His book is like an open wound, fully exposed, one that he will not hide beneath a bandage, but, rather, lets bleed in full view of the public. And while the graphic portrayals of such sorrowful living fill *Kaffir Boy* from beginning to end, they are still not the most remarkable, most thought-provoking element of the book. Surviving apartheid conditions is truly extraordinary, but doing so with an air of hope and an unshakeable belief in a better future is nothing short of miraculous.

It was Mathabane's mother who instilled in him the will to rise above apartheid and the knowledge that the only way to do it was through education. Though uneducated and illiterate herself, Mama Mathabane told her children stories which contained lessons in morality and human kindness, and through these tales, they learned right from wrong, good from bad. After so many descriptions of horrible events, it is arresting to come upon a passage in *Kaffir Boy* in which Mathabane relates the things he learned from his mother. He claims, "I learned that good deeds advance one positively in life ... and that bad deeds accomplish the contrary. I learned that good always invariably triumphs over evil; that having brains is often better than having brawn." Mathabane also lists the preferences he came to embrace, in spite of the world around him: "I learned to prefer peace to war, cleverness to stupidity, love to hate, sensitivity to stoicism, humility to pomposity, reconciliation to hostility ...," and the list goes on. But the most remarkable and most revealing statement in this passage is his testament that "underdogs in all situations of life need to have unlimited patience, resiliency, stubbornness and unshakeable hope in order to triumph in the end." To refer to himself and all the members of his downtrodden race struggling with apartheid as simply "underdogs" is almost too frivolous, but it is indicative of his staunch refusal to become mired in self-pity and helplessness. Like an underdog without a chance in the big game, Mathabane played to win.

Toward the end of *Kaffir Boy*, in a passage relating a conversation he had with his high school principal, Mathabane makes another statement that seems completely out of place in the midst of appalling details. In confiding his belief that someday he will make it out of the ghetto, out of South Africa altogether, he says, "Maybe I'm just dreaming. But I've had so many dreams come true in my life...." So many *dreams come true*? Not *nightmares*? And this from a boy who has to clean his teeth with a finger dipped in dirty water because his family cannot afford toothbrushes; a boy who is regularly beaten up by neighborhood gangs for not being one of them and a boy forced to crawl into a garbage can full of human waste for the amusement of the men hired to haul it away; a boy whose father has never shown him love (until the end) and who ridicules his enjoyment of books and learning. How can so much humility and thankfulness prevail within the spirit of such a battered and broken human being? How can a young individual shoulder so much pain and misery and still speak of dreams that have come true?

Perhaps this is the secret to Mathabane's survival, or, more importantly, to his triumph. The virtues he learned from his mother's stories were not just idle platitudes that sounded good but held no useful meaning. Instead, the ideas of "unlimited patience" and "unshakeable hope" became ingrained within the very fabric of the boy's soul. And as he grew, those beliefs did not fade, but became stronger and more vibrant, like a light held out before him, beckoning. This is the reason that he is able to tell his principal that he has already had dreams come true. Specifically, he is referring to the good grades he has made in school and the likelihood of securing a scholarship to a local university. But, undoubtedly, Mathabane also means the spiritual awakening he has experienced through the strength of his mother and the true belief in a better life ahead that he sees in her. And it is through his own fortitude and his own undying faith that he is able to get to that better life. Boarding the plane for America at the end of the book is really only the beginning.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on *Kaffir Boy*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002. Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a

university publications department.

» [Back to Section Index](#)

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

The Reality of South African Apartheid

In this essay, Rena Korb explores the astonishing reality of South African apartheid as depicted in Mathabane's story.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many people possess a cursory understanding of South Africa under apartheid. They know that this system of institutionalized racism created laws that kept black South Africans and white South Africans apart in every way possible. The two groups lived in their own neighborhoods, had access to disparate public facilities, attended separate schools, and held different types of job. Black South Africans were unable to vote or take part in government, and they were consistently denied any meaningful educational and economic opportunities. Apartheid drew international criticism in the 1980s, and with its dismantling in the 1990s and Nelson Mandela being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, the basic facts of apartheid are somewhat commonplace. Basic facts, however, do little to express the grueling conditions under which black South Africans lived out their day-to-day existence. Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy*—published in the late 1980s, when apartheid was still the law of the land in South Africa—chronicles the grim reality inflicted upon the vast majority of blacks living under the apartheid regime, a reality that many foreigners would be hard pressed to conceive of. Oprah Winfrey, who introduced the book to countless American readers through her television talk show, spoke rightly when she noted that "[F]or most people, apartheid is just an abstraction, a symbol of a movement. This book turns the symbol into feelings. You breathe and feel it and live it for yourself."

Kaffir Boy opens with a brief chapter that introduces the background of apartheid, at the same time, succinctly elucidating the role of black people in South African society. The second chapter—the chapter with which the narrative proper begins—immediately sets the scene of life in the ghettos of South Africa, with its pre-eminent theme of prevalent and arbitrary violence against blacks. A police raid, described by Johannes (Mathabane's birthname), then only a boy of about five, clarifies the extent of the violence against blacks. Johannes awakens to noises from outside: "Sirens blared, voices screamed and shouted, wood cracked and windows shattered, children bawled, dogs barked and footsteps pounded"—all part of a "pandemonium outside [that] was intensifying." During these raids, blacks of all ages are attacked and become the victims of officially sanctioned violence. A policeman's beating of Johannes for the "crime" of delaying in opening the door to the shack fast enough typifies the extreme level of savagery that too often characterizes black life in the ghettos.

The raid, marking the beginning of "Operation Clean-up Month" and unleashing unprecedented attacks against blacks, also demonstrates the seeming randomness of the actions against blacks. Not only do the policemen brutalize defenseless children, they round up non-whites who have committed any multitude of offenses: these so-called criminals include "people whose passbooks were not in order, gangsters, prostitutes, black families living illegally in the township, shebeen [neighborhood bar] owners, and those person deemed 'undesirables' under the Influx Control Law." According to apartheid laws, most of the people living in Alexandra—including Mathabane's mother—would be subject to arrest and possible deportation to the homelands. The severe punishments to which the blacks are subject do not coincide to any comprehensible degree with their transgressions. For instance, in this raid, the elder Mathabane, who is guilty of several passbook offenses, is sent to labor on a white man's farm for two months. After another raid, Johannes's father is again arrested, this time for committing the "unpardonable crime of being unemployed," and he is subsequently imprisoned for almost a year. During his long absence, the family, lacking food and money,

resorts to the direst means to survive. The children scrounge for food in one of the city dumps where the refuse from white people's homes is brought; collect eggs rejected by the chicken factory, many of which contain dead embryos; or eat locusts, worms, or soup made of cow's blood.

The seeming unreality of these raids, with their dire consequences, is underscored by Mathabane's matter-of-fact description of how he and the other children react to the police presence. Barely six years of age, Johannes already sees Peri-Urban as a "tormenting presence," yet one that he "came to accept ... as a way of life." Though terrified by the police raids, to such an extent that he wakes up screaming from nightmares, Johannes is forced to be complicit in the raids out of sheer necessity; that is, like all the children in his neighborhood, he quickly comes to recognize police cues that indicate that a raid is about to take place and learns how to "fabricate ingenious lies to prevent them from searching the house." Mathabane recalls that "[w]henver we were out at play we were expected to act as sentries." However, he also acknowledges that his fear rendered him essentially useless in this role. All of these grim details Mathabane records in a realistic, unflinching tone, hardly the point of view that most young children are forced to assume. While he is still a boy, Johannes comes to realize that "black people had to map out their lives, their future, with the terror of the police in mind."

Mathabane's narrative also makes clear the surreal and arbitrary nature of the apartheid laws. A prime example is when Johannes accompanies a migrant worker to see the superintendent of the ghetto after the man is caught breaking a housing law. Johannes's intercession, spoken in the superintendent's native Afrikaans, is the only reason that the migrant worker does not get deported from Alexandra. Johannes notes that when the superintendent begins to question him, the "tone of his voice suggested that hitherto he had been bored, but that I had ... injected some excitement into the otherwise routine job of interrogating and sentencing a black Influx Control offender." The superintendent not only overlooks the migrant worker's crime, he even allows his family into the ghetto, which is an almost unheard of privilege. This incident clearly shows that, in the hands of white authorities, the black laws are mutable because they are based on no just criteria.

Johannes's growing awareness of exactly what apartheid means in the day-to-day world also demonstrates its surreal yet pervasive nature. One day Johannes boards the bus for white people, a mistake that could get him and his grandmother sent to prison or even killed. To appease the irate bus driver, Granny uses her dress to wipe the steps upon which Johannes had climbed. After the incident, Granny yells at Johannes for his carelessness. "But Granny, I only stood on the steps," Johannes points out. "I would have understood had I sat on any seat." Johannes questions the logic of the white law and the "enormity" of the "crime of standing on the steps of a white bus." He wonders, "Were the poor white passengers going to die as a result?" Johannes's remark and his inner speculation are telling. With his words and thoughts, he reveals the levels of severity of racial segregation and the indoctrination that everyone in South Africa—blacks and whites—undergoes to accept the peculiarity of apartheid. Granny proceeds to explain apartheid to Johannes, using two phone booths, one a white phone booth and one a black phone booth, to demonstrate the separateness of the races. Johannes notes that "the two phone booths were exactly the same in all respects—colour, size, and shape."

Throughout Mathabane's childhood, the South African government continues to create new laws that inflict further damage on black society. The government passes Influx Control laws that prevent black families from residing together in White South Africa and keeps as many blacks as possible out of the cities. The government announces its plans to demolish the Alexandra ghetto and transform it into a location where only barracks housing single men and women, who worked for whites, could live. Though this dismantling of the ghetto ends up not taking place for a number of years, this policy demonstrates how apartheid laws not only served to prevent Africans from bettering their lives but even more heinously, as a mechanism to break up families and their ties. Many other elements of society show this. Men migrate to the city, while their families remain behind on the tribal homelands. One boy whom Johannes meets on the Venda tribal lands has a father who has not been home in seven years. There is no other option for existence for these men. As Mathabane

points out, despite the "threat of persecution and deportation if found, and the fact that Alexandra was being demolished," waves of men continue to arrive in the city. Mathabane particularly comments on the plight of the migrant workers, characterizing them as the "walking dead." These men, writes Mathabane, suffer from a "death far worse than physical death ... the death of the mind and soul, when, despite toiling night and day, ... you still cannot make enough to clothe, shelter and feed your loved ones, [who are] ... forcibly separated from you."

Although the Mathabane family remains together in Alexandra, apartheid still works its nefarious effect on them. Jackson Mathabane's arrests have made him irrevocably embittered. As Mathabane writes in his preface to *Kaffir Boy*, "They [the architects of apartheid] turned my father—by repeatedly arresting him and denying him the right to earn a living in a way that gave him dignity—into such a bitter man that, as he fiercely but in vain resisted the emasculation, he hurt those he loved the most." After his prison experience, the elder Mathabane has the greatest difficulty fulfilling the emotional needs of his wife and children. Johannes recalls one night when he brought the children home fish and chips to eat. In their excitement, "George and Florah ran up to my father and embraced him. He blushed; I could see he was happy. My mother smiled. That was one of the few times I was to see our entire family happy." Unfortunately, this moment is fleeting and rare; within a short period of time, Jackson Mathabane's "metamorphosis" into a man who no longer allows his children to hug or kiss him or even say goodnight to him. Johannes "came to fear him, to fear even the sound of his voice, even the sight of his shadow ... Came to spend days and nights wishing he were dead."

Mathabane's narrative is filled with other details that show the abject poverty and deprivation of life in the black ghettos of South Africa. However, the alternative to the ghetto is by no means attractive either. As a boy, Johannes returns to his father's tribal reserve for a visit. The Venda homeland appears as a wasteland, with clouds of dust rising from the dry soil and the occasional livestock grazing on the few stubby bits of grass. "Everywhere I went," Mathabane recalls, "nothing grew except near lavatories." It is also a place without adult males, for most of the men who lived on tribal reserves migrated to the city, where they remained eleven months out of the year, to work.

After Johannes is introduced to a world in which all whites do not hate all blacks, he is able to give voice to the experiences of his childhood. He tells the Smiths about what life is like for him and other blacks.

I told her about the indoctrination that took place in black schools under the guise of Bantu Education, the self-hatred that resulted from being constantly told that you are less than human and being treated that way. I told her of the anger and hatred pent-up inside millions of blacks, destroying their minds.... I would have told them about the ragged blacks boys and girls of seven, eight and nine years who constantly left their homes because of hunger and a disintegrating family life and were making it on their own: by begging along the thoroughfares of Johannesburg; by sleeping in scrapped cars, gutters and in abandoned buildings; by bathing in the diseased Jukskei River; and by eating out of trash cans, sucking festering sores and stealing rotting produce from the Indian traders on First Avenue. I would have told them about how these orphans of the streets, some of them my friends—their physical, intellectual and emotional growth dwarfed and stunted—had grown up to become prostitutes, unwed mothers and tsotsis, littering the ghetto streets with illegitimate children and corpses. I would have them all this, but I didn't; I feared they would not believe me.

With the autobiography *Kaffir Boy*, Mathabane at last is able to tell his story to a world that will believe him.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on *Kaffir Boy*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002. Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers

- » [Back to Section Index](#)
- » [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Compare and Contrast

- **1960s and 1970s:** Alexandra, South Africa, Mathabane's birthplace, remains a designated Bantu location where over 100,000 blacks live in segregation and poverty as a result of apartheid laws. Throughout South Africa, thousands of blacks are brutalized, imprisoned, or killed.

1980s and 1990s: Mathabane's family members remain in apartheid–governed Alexandra where the conditions of the previous two decades have changed very little—even after the abolishment of apartheid in the early nineties.

Today: Alexandra and her citizens still suffer from the long–term effects of poverty and racial abuse, but apartheid has legally ended. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1994, is ongoing. Its mission is to establish democracy and national unity. Its three commissions cover human rights violations, amnesty, and reparation and rehabilitation. The commissions seek to give victims the opportunity to relate the full details of their suffering, force perpetrators of violence against blacks to publicly confess their actions, and then attempt to rehabilitate those perpetrators who acted within apartheid law (now acknowledged as wrong) and to make reparation to the victims of that law.

- **1960s and 1970s:** Despite enduring eighteen years of poverty, physical abuse, and malnutrition, Mathabane makes excellent grades in school, remains at the top of his class and secures scholarships for his secondary education. Perseverance and his mother's guidance and support enable him not only to survive but also to win an athletic scholarship to an American college.

1980s and 1990s: Mathabane graduates from Dowling College, New York, with a degree in economics and becomes a best–selling author. He triumphs over prejudice and taboo by marrying a white American with whom he co–writes a book and raises a family.

Today: A husband, father, and highly successful writer, Mathabane serves as the director of multicultural education at a private school in Portland, Oregon.

- » [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Topics for Further Study

- Research the American writer Richard Wright, author of *Black Boy*. What themes and subject matter dominate his work? When and why did he write? In what ways are his themes and subject matter similar to Mathabane's? Write a comparative review of the themes and subject matter of each book.
- The 1980s were often characterized by political controversy concerning international financial investments and involvement in South Africa. Research the role of the United States in this controversy. Find out why many American college students led protests calling for divestment of American holdings in South Africa. Write the opening statement for the affirmative side of a debate in favor of U.S. economic divestment in South Africa in the year 1986.

- Research the student protests that took place in Soweto and Alexandra, South Africa, in June of 1976. Why did the students loot and burn the schools? What specific books does Mathabane tell us in chapter 44 of *Kaffir Boy* he risked his life to save? Make an annotated list of three or four books you would be willing to risk your life to save. Explain why you think they are books that all students should read.
- Research the action and findings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Exactly what is the commission? How does it work? Why did the post–apartheid government in South Africa choose this method of resolving past atrocities and racial abuse during apartheid? Design a similar program for more effectively dealing with student conduct at your school or college. Include a preface arguing the merits of the program for the college dean or the local school board.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Media Adaptations

- An abridged audio version of *Kaffir Boy* was released in 1988 by Dove Audio Inc. The three–hour tape is read by the actor Howard Rollins. Currently, it is out of print but can still be purchased from Amazon.com.
- The Library of Congress maintains a free reading service for the blind and handicapped at <http://www.loc.gov/nls/> with links to unabridged audio recordings of *Kaffir Boy* that may be requested either by qualifying individuals or teachers of qualifying individuals.
- Mathabane maintains a web page at <http://www.mathabane.com/index.html> with links to numerous speeches, essays, prefaces, and first chapters of his books—including three recent novels: *Ubuntu*, *The Last Liberal*, and *Deadly Memory*. Visitors may also request free copies of articles or purchase autographed copies of Mathabane's books online.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

What Do I Read Next?

- *Kaffir Boy in America* (1989) is Mathabane's thoroughly candid story of his first ten years in the United States: his long–standing friendship with his patrons, Stan and Marjory Smith; the culture shock that led him to transfer from one college to another; the beginning of his writing career; the overwhelming success of his first book, *Kaffir Boy*; his marriage to Gail Ernsberger; the reunion with his mother and siblings on the Oprah Winfrey show; and his provision of a home and education for three of his siblings in North Carolina.
- *Love in Black and White: The Triumph of Love over Prejudice and Taboo* (1992) is co–written by Mathabane and his Caucasian wife, Gail. It is the story of their friendship, courtship, and marriage, structured in alternate chapters with husband and wife each relating their individual perspectives. It also includes interviews with other racially mixed couples in America.
- *African Women* (1994), also by Mathabane, is the story of Granny (Mathabane's maternal grandmother), Geli (his mother), and Florah (his oldest sister). The book is divided into six first–person monologues, each discussing the fate of women under apartheid: the selling of young girls as wives, infidelity, physical abuse, alcoholism, disease, and perseverance through it all.

- *Miriam's Song* (2000), by Miriam Mathabane as told to her brother, is her story about coming of age in apartheid-ruled South Africa. Like *Kaffir Boy*, its first-person narration pulls the reader immediately into the violent world of Alexandra and ends with her barely escaping the ghetto with her life and her child. A physically battered rape victim, like countless others before her, she leaves for the promise of a better life in America.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Bibliography and Further Reading

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Olney, James. "African Autobiography and the Non-African Reader." In *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*. Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 26–78.

Thomas, Lillian. *New York Times Book Review*. April 27, 1986, p. 23.

Further Reading

Achebe, Chinua. *"Girls at War" and Other Stories*. Heinemann Educational Books Limited, 1972. *"Girls at War" and Other Stories* is a collection of twelve short stories including the often anthologized "Marriage Is a Private Affair" and "Dead Men's Path." Set in the twentieth-century changing world of Nigeria, the stories focus on conflicts arising from the clash between eroding tribal customs and the growing influences of the modern world.

Fugard, Athol. *Master Harold and the Boys*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. In this sadly poignant play, Fugard forces his audience to confront the depth and power of racism that has become repressed or hidden. He demonstrates just how tenuous white and black relations can be, how easy it is for one moment of hurt and anger to destroy years of love and compassion.

Head, Bessie. *Maru*. Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1971. *Maru* is one of three significant novels by Head that are set in Botswana, where she herself lived in political exile for fifteen years before gaining citizenship. The protagonist, like Head herself, is an orphaned girl and teacher who seeks refuge in a small Botswana village, only to be treated as an outcast whose presence divides the village.

Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Little, Brown and Company, 1994. *Long Walk to Freedom* was published after apartheid had been abolished. It is the deeply moving memoir of Nelson Mandela, president of the African National Congress and the 1993 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Having spent a quarter of a century in prison for his anti-apartheid activities, he was the first black to be elected in South Africa's first-ever multiracial elections in April, 1994.

Olney, James. "African Autobiography and the Non-African Reader." In *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to*

African Literature. Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 26–78. Olney explains that African autobiography is paradoxically both diverse and unified. Despite its "diversity of motives, points of view, and forms," African autobiographical literature shares a unified "vision of the human experience" that is uniquely African.

Paton, Alan. *Cry the Beloved Country*. Scribner, 1948. Published in February before the National Party and apartheid came into power in May, *Cry the Beloved Country* was the first book to make the international community aware of the coming horrors of apartheid. It was adapted into the Broadway musical *Lost in the Stars* in 1949 and into two major films under its original title. The 1951 version starred Sidney Poitier; the 1995 version starred Richard Harris and James Earl Jones.

» [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa is Mark Mathabane's 1986 autobiography about life under the South African apartheid regime. It focuses on the brutality of the apartheid system and how he escaped from it, and from the township Alexandra, to become a well-known tennis player. He also depicted how the young black children dealt with racism and stereotypes. By embracing education, he is able to rise out of despair and destitution.