

**Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction by Elleke Boehmer**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 204 pp. £7.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-0-19-280301-6.

Elleke Boehmer's addition to the Very Short Introduction Series portrays the life of South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, providing a complete narrative of the man behind the Madiba magic. Mandela has fulfilled a variety of roles – diligent student, city slicker, dashing guerilla, political prisoner, a messianic-like savoir as well as lawyer, activist, politician, freedom fighter, reconciler, leader, and finally president. This short introduction chronicles Mandela's life through a range of themes providing an informed account of his ideas, traditions, motivations, relationships, and roles. Instead of simply admiring Mandela as several other biographies tend to, Boehmer presents what she describes as the processes of meaning-making, which have caused Mandela's admiration throughout the world (pg. 9).

The first several chapters of the book detail Mandela's life in parallel with the evolution of the struggle to build a non-racial South Africa. By his own account, Mandela embodies his country and its struggle. Boehmer's discussion is therefore woven within the history of the African National Congress (ANC) and its freedom movement. Although Mandela's early life has been chronicled and analyzed in several biographies including his own "Long Walk to Freedom," Boehmer's provides a concise background on Mandela's life before delving into his inspirations later in the book.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born 18 July 1918 in the isiXhosa speaking rural community of Mvezo in the Eastern Cape. Born a Thembu, Mandela was raised primarily by Jongintaba Dalindyebo, after his father died in 1927. Growing up in what Mandela referred to as Jongintaba's Great Place provided him with a strong background in consensual democracy and the traditional African ideal of 'ubuntu', while his experiences at school trained him to be proper 'Black Englishman' instilling the practice of hard-work and self-restraint.

Mandela led the ANC, strengthening the movement by conceiving of the M-plan to enable the ANC to survive after banning and established the ANC Youth League and then served as its first President. His leadership, orations at his 1964 treason trial, and subsequent imprisonment led him to become the cornerstone of the movement. During his 27 years of incarceration, he became more dedicated to achieving racial harmony through peaceful negotiations. His calm intelligence and oratory craft served him well in the negotiations preceding his 1994 election. Boehmer's analysis begins where many other biographies end, at the conclusion of the chronological journey of Mandela's life.

The second half of the book presents Mandela's inspirations and philosophies. Although typically placed alongside great peacemakers like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., in this account, the author elucidates on the cultural and political influences of fellow revolutionaries Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and India's Jawaharlal Nehru. Unlike biographers who commonly compare Mandela to Gandhi, Boehmer focuses on the differences between the radicals; whereas, Gandhi never wavered from his commitment to non-violence, Mandela advocated for arms. Mandela's activism originated by witnessing Jongintaba's court and the self-reliance he learned at school. Mandela's life is more than an "individualistic heroic reading" of "an independently constituted identity on the road to self-realization through the fight for freedom," the story of Mandela is "formed in relation to different contingent histories, as an interface between multiple, at times conflicting, discourses and processes of self-definition (pp.82-83)."

Mandela's success is representative of aspects of his upbringing in the Transkei, his Thembu lineage, friendships with Oliver Tambo and Govan Mbeki, and the philosophy of Franz Fanon and the Black Consciousness Movement.

Boehmer describes the strong contrast between the radical youth and the solemn man who emerged a world leader. Mandela was influenced by the inter-cultural hustle and bustle of central Johannesburg, where he was cultured to wear sophisticated suits, speak 'patois', and box, even posing for a prominent magazine cover. Mandela was inspired as much from philosophy and activism as from the urbanism where he learned to "choreograph an image in order to press a political point (p. 121)." In many ways, Mandela serves as a contrast to the backward, rural stereotypes of Blacks in South Africa.

Toward the end of the book, Boehmer enlightens readers on some obscure details, delving into the nuances of Mandela's appeal including his vanity and passion for gardening. He consciously groomed himself to look his part as if he was acting in a play. His masculinity and theatrical clothing demonstrated his shrewd political power of his own image. Unknown to many readers, Mandela was an avid gardener. As a young impulsive prisoner, he learned patience from working with nature. This patience was critical when he negotiated with the apartheid government. While it is difficult to know his thoughts, understanding his endeavors provides insight into Mandela's thoughts while incarcerated and then as President.

This biography provides a concise background for those interested in the Nelson Mandela and his role in South Africa's political transformation in an accessible format. *Amandla ngawethu!*

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