

# Struggle heroes for children

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A series of books for children on 10 of South Africa's prominent freedom fighters is not only a wonderful classroom resource but a good place to start for anyone in search of introductory information on the struggle against apartheid.



*Freedom Fighters*, from the Learning African History series, documents the lives of 10 legendary activists – Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Seretse Khama, Desmond Tutu, Chris Hani, Helen Joseph, Thabo Mbeki and

Steve Biko.

Pitched at 9-10-year-old English first language speakers and 11-13-year-old English second language speakers and written by award-winning children's book writer Chris van Wyk, the series colourfully documents the lives of 10 extraordinary people.

The books are written in a crisp and direct way and easily hold the interest of the reader. What attracts the young reader in particular is their colourful packaging and captivating and original pictures (many of the photographs have never been published before).

Using individuals as the vehicle to describe the country's journey from apartheid to democracy is a clever one: it sustains the interest of the reader and allows him or her to identify with each of the individuals' very different stories as well as absorb the historical context in which their struggles were played out.



Although the series includes individuals with vastly different backgrounds – from Helen Joseph, a party-loving socialite from Durban to Seretse Khama, chief of the Bangwato people in Botswana at the age of four! – what is apparent is the extent to which so many of the country's political

activists overcame obstacles like poverty and rural isolation to get their school and university education and pursue their goals, determined to succeed despite the odds.

The early lives of these "struggle heroes" will be of interest to young readers. Such as how Chris or Tembisile (his real first name) Hani got teased for doing "women's work" – helping his mother collect water and firewood – when he was small; or how Winnie Madikizela-Mandela had to leave school for six months at the age of eight and milk cows and look after sheep and goats; or how Desmond Tutu was born so tiny he was not expected to live.

The realities of apartheid – the "whites-only" areas, the struggle for education, the indignity of passes – are clearly described and will help convey to the younger generation, whose understanding of apartheid is largely theoretical, what life was like for their parents and grandparents.

The lives of the activists are painted in broad brushstrokes and the more complex and controversial aspects of "the struggle" and those surrounding some of the individuals themselves are usually omitted. The controversies that have dogged Madikizela-Mandela are hinted at with the sentence: "Some people do not like Winnie Mandela but many admire her for her courage and her strength and for her role during the struggle."



**A rare picture of a young Winnie Madikizela-Mandela milking a cow**



**Thabo Mbeki and Chris Hani as fresh-faced activists**



**Seretse Khama with his wife Ruth and baby**



**Steve Biko with his wife Ntsiki and their son, Nkosinathi**



**Nelson and Winnie Mandela on their wedding day**

The death of Stompie Sepele and subsequent conviction of Mandela on kidnapping charges are briefly mentioned without much explanation. No mention is made of Steve Biko's relationship with Mamphela Ramphele and the child that was born from it, for example, or the fact that Mandela's marriage to Winnie was his second. These are details that would be interesting to the targeted audience.

It could be argued that young minds are not sophisticated enough to deal with any complexities without losing the general thrust of the series – celebrating the lives of brave and remarkable people who helped bring about the downfall of apartheid.

However, the "rosy-tinted treatment" is a weakness. Painting the heroes as flawless individuals makes them seem less real – even to young minds – and gives the series a whiff of dogma. It also patronizes children who are in fact old enough to question and debate.

The "Freedom Fighters" series was tested on a Britney Spears/Emanem-obsessed nine-year-old, Alice. Far from needing a preparatory sermon to fuel her interest in the books, she was immediately drawn to them and spent a long time pouring over the pages. She particularly liked the one on Winnie Mandela, who for all age groups is a fascinating figure, whether one likes her or not.



This is what Alice had to say: "Generally I like the books. They teach us about racism and apartheid. The one on Thabo Mbeki is interesting because it tells you things about him you didn't know. The one on Nelson Mandela isn't that interesting because everyone knows that stuff about him already."

"I don't know if I would read all of them. They would be great to have in the school library for school projects but I don't know if someone would just go and read them. They prefer Sweet Valley High and other books like that."

The 10-book boxed set is published by **Awareness Publishing** and costs R975.20. Tel: (011) 403-3008; fax: (011) 403-1150.

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