

# An easy struggle to get to grips with our freedom

**T**HOSE struggle heroes are more than names, right? Yet too often the valuable legacy of people like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Chris Hani and Steve Biko are reduced to just that, and the only way that we who came too late to experience the struggle can fill in the gaps is to wade through tomes of contemporary history and political analysis.

No wonder so many teens and twentysomethings are fuzzy on the nastier nuts and bolts of apartheid.

Now, thanks to a remark Madiba himself made a year or so ago, you needn't look any further than the children's section of the local bookstore to learn a bit more about some of the people who fought for democracy.

A series of 10 children's books on 10 freedom fighters was launched at the Centre of the Book this week. Written by children's author and poet Chris van Wyk, they are a must-read for kids and ignorant grown-ups alike, providing a surprisingly thorough shortcut to our recent history and some of the people who shaped it.

At the launch, Michael Neu-Ner, managing director of Awareness Publishers and the brain behind the series, said: "(It) was inspired by a newspaper article in The Star in November 2001 in which Nelson Mandela said he wanted children to know about the struggle heroes, and lamented children's lack of knowledge of people like Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Bram Fischer."

And while it is true that children's literature and politics are a strange mix, Chris van Wyk was a good choice of author. Brief and to-the-point, his easy prose combines the light and the hefty aspects of the 10's lives in simple and chatty English.

We learn about the Freedom Charter, the Sharpeville Massacre, the march to the

## FREEDOM FIGHTERS

Chris van Wyk  
(Awareness Publishing)

Review:

JEANNE VAN DER MERWE



Union Buildings against the pass laws, the campaign of defiance against the apartheid laws, the Rivonia trial – along with humorous and interesting details of the subjects' lives.

For instance – our former president's middle name, Rolihlahla, means "troublesome" and current President Thabo Mbeki used to feign illness to stay away from school because he struggled with maths.

Desmond Tutu used to walk around with his head in a book, and ANC Youth League founder Oliver Tambo and Madiba were both kicked out of Fort Hare University for protesting about unappetising food.

When he was a boy, former ANC president and Nobel laureate Albert Luthuli's classmates threatened to beat him up because he always knew the answers to the teachers' questions. And a riding accident launched the political career of lifelong activist Helen Joseph.

Other important history includes how Steve Biko's defiance of a government ban led to his brutal death in detention, and how Winnie Madikizela-Mandela conducted a life of protest while her husband was in prison.



Old comrades reunited: freedom struggle contemporaries Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela meet in Stockholm, Sweden in 1990, after 28 years.

There's the extraordinary story of Botswana's Seretse Khama's marriage to a white British woman and how he led that country to independence. And Chris Hani's progression from leader of uMkonto weSizwe to key negotiator in our transition to democracy, before he was shot dead in his driveway

by two rightwingers. The sturdy little books are attractively presented and look like they'll stand up to a lot of wear and tear. The large print is good for beginners and for people who need reading glasses. Contemporary photographs effectively bring the text to life.

The books are also good as

basic reference guides for learners, containing glossaries of terms like "apartheid", "pass laws", "comrades" and "boycotts", as well as a handy timeline briefly tracking each person's career highlights.

The books present the past in a neutral and businesslike manner, with no cynicism

or political rhetoric clouding the facts and events in the 10 characters' lives.

● Awareness has already received a bulk order from Jamaica for the series, and McGraw-Hill Publishing in the US has expressed interest in publishing the books there.

The books should be avail-

able in bookshops soon, and they're expected to be priced at about R120 each.

Neu-Ner said they are being translated into Afrikaans, and possibly into other languages later.

Last year, they published a similar series on HIV/Aids, to be translated into Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho.