

### **Are you two sisters? A memoir.**

Hester van der Walt.

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Hester is short, fragile and sickly, the eldest of seven siblings of a poor Afrikaner mine worker family. Lies is thin and tall, coming from a refined family of Dutch missionaries. They meet during their nurse training at a hospital in Bloemfontein and go on to spend the rest of their lives together, as friends, partners and comrades.

Hester van der Walt's memoir is equally the coming-of-age story of the author, the story of the relationship between Hester and Lies and the story of the freedom struggle in South Africa. The 127 pages span more than fifty years from early 1960's until 2016 and cover much more than the love story of an Afrikaans and a Dutch woman—a relationship so impossible to grasp at that time that they were asked if they are sisters. Each of these aspects (the coming-of-age story, the love story and the story of the struggle) would provide enough material for a much larger book, but Van der Walt somehow manages to intertwine them in a manner that is easy and exciting to read.

Van der Walt's poems were included in a few collections of poetry and she also wrote *Hester's Book of Bread* (2012; earlier published in Afrikaans as *Hester se brood*, 2009). *Are You Two Sisters?* was published simultaneously in English and Afrikaans. Her writing is subtle and humble, absolutely missing the grandiosity one sometimes associates with memoirs. The form of *Are You Two Sisters?* is also quite unusual for a memoir. The author is present in the stream of memories that make up the narrative, but does not dominate it. Multiple chapters start with a poem or a poetic excerpt from Van der Walt's writing. Song lyrics and work by other poets such as Breyten Breytenbach (68) are also quoted.

"How does awakening begin? In small steps, I think now, looking back on my life, at the young girl with the

asthmatic chest dragging herself up the steep slopes of District Six?" It was in the middle of Cape Town's District Six with its diverse multicultural population that Hester got to know other South African cultures and learned to appreciate the country's heterogeneity. But it was at the Siloam hospital in Venda that both Hester and Lies became increasingly conscious of social inequalities in South Africa, the systemic oppressions of apartheid, but also of the sexism and racism within their own church. At the same time, the stay at the missionary hospital marks the moment when their love for each other takes a concrete, verbalised form. From then on, discreetly, they would live as a couple. Hester and Lies, perceived by many as "two white Afrikaans girls in search of truth and justice and convinced that apartheid was wrong" (59–60), started more and more to question the system in which they grew up, as well as their church.

Their search for truth, justice and acceptance (for themselves and others) lead them to various places, and various jobs, with Hester branching out from nursing and then switching completely to social work. As they were taking a more and more active part in the struggle while managing to keep paying jobs, in the late 1970's their Cape Town home became "a temporary refuge for friends who dare not stay at their own homes" (68). Hester and Lies's social activism lead to Hester being incarcerated in Pollsmoor. Even though she was released after two weeks, her detention had a great impact on her and on Lies and it took them years to process: "Self-censorship. They succeeded in that. That is why I am writing about it now, so that everybody who wants to know will know, today and in the future, how ridiculous and petty oppression is, how many layers of oppression there were, and how even the tiniest little cog like me experienced it" (104).

This memoir can undoubtedly be read as an act of activism and social engagement. The motivation for writing this memoir does not lie in the urge to celebrate and/or preserve the author's legacy, but in her striving to support and initiate positive social change. *Are You Two Sisters?*, is a thin, unpretentious book. However, this humble publication carries the humane message that every single person can (and should!) make a difference. "If I think back to that time, I can see I chose jobs I hoped would make a difference to the lives of people who were suffering," (70) Van der Walt writes. Her memoir speaks of a selfless choosing for the sake of the Other, of undying hope and of helping no matter the costs. Hester van der Walt and Lies Hoogendoorn finally found their place in the world in the village of McGregor where they play an active role in the local

community: “And suddenly I see that all my dreams have come true. On their own. This is how it feels to be part of a village, to belong. Warm around the heart” (127).

**Martina Vitackova**  
**m.vitackova@gmail.com**  
**Ghent University**  
**Ghent, Belgium**

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4082-2140>

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