

## RESENSIES / REVIEWS

### **Skollie: One man's struggle to survive by telling stories.**

John W. Fredericks. Cape Town: Penguin Random House. 251 pp. ISBN: 978-1-77609-199-7.

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The growth of South African film since 1994 has been astonishing, mainly due to a new generation of adventurous scriptwriters and filmmakers, new challenges and new funding mechanisms. Directors who previously battled for years to raise budgets for films that break the mold and which innovate thematically are now attracting investment. *Noemy Skollie* is one of these, now followed by the written story on which the film is based. Normally, it is the book that informs the film. In this case, the film preceded the book, and the fit—bar a gratuitous raunchy sex scene with characters whose connection to the story are unclear—is quite close.

Not only did the book follow a locally-financed movie, but it is published by an international firm. Also, the book retains the earthiness of the film, with English translated from *tsotsitaal*, or gangster language, specifically that Cape Flats Afrikaans dialect that is found only in

the lawless and violence-ridden coloured townships on the Cape Peninsula. One can almost hear the very distinctive Western Cape accent via the idiosyncratic spelling of the phrasing and the Afrikaans words in the written version. The Afrikaans is recurrently inserted in italics after specific English sentences. The result is an italicized almost visual rhythmography augmenting the English-language narrative. After a while, for readers who want to skip the dialect Afrikaans, their eye will jump over the text connecting the English though doing this for the entire text can be quite taxing.

Skollie means miscreant or gangster, although translated in the movie subtitle as “thief”, who is both the differently named character in the film and the autobiographical writer of the book. It's an unusual biography as it is written as a stream of consciousness, lacking the normal signposted specifics of autobiographies. Speaking colourful language, slang and profanity Skollie takes us from his childhood into his adulthood by writing about very specific incidents and events relating to him and his friends, and how he came to become a gangster. And, the experience, is not pretty, easy on the mind, or reassuring.

The sense of “being there” is very powerful, sometimes overwhelming, and always is laced with anticipation. How does a barely educated gangster actually remember, compose and then write such a story? We learn a lot about the character, his circumstances, his family, his friends and his very violent enemies. The last few chapters deal with the screenwriting and production processes. This is where we read about Fredericks’ encounter with film and TV, who helped him enter the industry, who open doors for him, where and how he learned the craft of script-writing, and the trials and tribulations of getting films made. A moment of poignant resonance for both of us was that one of his early supporters from within the industry, Johan Blignaut, had sent each of us separate personalised notes on his tragic suicide, something of which I was unaware until I read the book. We are all bound together by various networks and layers of meaning. Johan was looking after his friends and associates even in his most dire moment of anguish. This almost throwaway line is what characterises the book as a whole. Behind the violence is a latent empathy, a story of a new beginning, of recognizing the opportunities and then leveraging them.

The final chapters are actually the most interesting, as John navigates his way through script training courses, working on film sets, writing and promoting projects, negotiating with clueless directors, and in overcoming disappointment. He used gangsters to protect film crews in dodgy areas even as he was educating youngsters out of violent

drug-addicted life and conditions. He presents himself as a role model for the future, taking responsibility for himself and his past behaviour. These included coping with punishment for actions of which he was innocent but of which he was accused. In the process Skollie/Fredericks develops something of an implicit autoethnography and blueprint for others caught up in gangster-ridden areas to not only escape that life but to turn it into content that can be produced, marketed and be educational and therapeutic. While his identities are multiple, his temper is barely controllable, his desire to kill those who cross him ever-present, but his fixation on a broader objective is what always saves him.

The seamless narrative of the character of Skollie is offered as a continuous unfolding of events from young boy, raped by someone he knows, to successful writer; there are no periodisations other than as a child, a skollie, a jailbird and after release (which includes his work in film, TV and writing). The typewriter—the means to representation—is in the foreground, while apartheid—the prime cause of the social conditions—is in the background. The 1976 uprising presented Fredericks job opportunities to legally leverage his and deploy his gangster skills as a security guard. Life is immediate, conditions are experienced within a small township radius, and of course, prison, where Skollie evades being raped because he is able to tell spell-binding stories to the inmates, stories that remind them of their own everyday lives and the consequences of their ill-advised

behaviors. All events, vignettes, incidents simply meld into each other, as the stories about Skollie's story unfolds. The strategies developed to deal with prison, soft and hard labour, cruel warders and dragging time, are fed through the stories told by Fredericks. This film is very hard to watch but its mise-en-scène and frame lighting draw one in, hypnotically so. This is a South Africa we all hear about but rarely experience, let alone "see" (as in the film) or imagine as in the book. The constantly moving camera positions viewers as observers looking through a window into a segment of real life where everything is contested, expectant however that Skollie's better judgement will prevail in the end. And it does.

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