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Bush of Ghosts / Deeper than Colour / Revelations

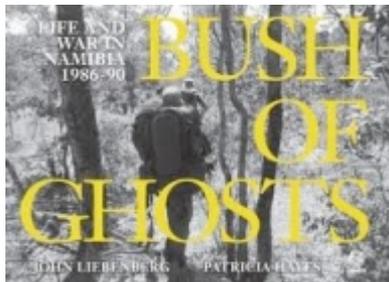
by John Liebenberg & Patricia Hayes / James Clelland / Mongane Wally Serote

Publisher: Umuzi/Jacana

Genre: Effects of war in fiction and non-fiction

Verdict: Award winning stuff

Book Reviewed by: Philip Todres



The aftermath of war and the struggle in South Africa – the effects on the psyche – is the theme that links the 3 books I am reviewing this month. And I am intrigued by the various ways each tries, with varying degrees of success, to reflect on the soul destroying and disruptive effects this has had on the individual and society in general.

Bush of Ghosts eloquently, perhaps chillingly might be a more adequate adjective, showcases the photographs of John Liebenberg with an essay by Patricia Hayes. The subtitle is 'Life and War in Namibia 1986 – 1990' which is the period these images cover. He had first been in the area in 1976 as a conscript in the South African army. This photographic record covers the period when Liebenberg worked with the independent newspaper The Namibian as a photographer.

Patricia Hayes explains the rationale for examining Liebenberg's photo archive as two-fold - the fact that there has been little attempt to grapple with what people did there and particularly to examine how conscripts "integrated this slice of personal biography into the rest of their lives, or – in some cases – did not".

As a photo journalist he was recording the times. But as Hayes observes, photos can be both present and distant. Perhaps that is why, when looking at these past images in the present, we can more clearly sense the ghosts – undercurrents and overtones that persistently lurk.

Having participated in this onslaught – how does one process the trauma and how does one reflect on the atrocities of a period – is the subject re-visited in another way in an exhibition by Christo

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Doherty titled *Bos* currently on in Johannesburg. In this case the artist tries to create a perspective through reconstructed or staged settings, some of which are based on Liebenberg's photographs. Distancing oneself seems to be the only way to perceive reality.

The novels by James Clelland and Mongane Wally Serote also grapple with the traumatic effects of war on the individual and the ways they try to deal with the issues.

Deeper than Colour by James Clelland won the European Literary Award 2010. Angus Smith, the protagonist in this tale, is a product of the Border War and exhibits all the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He's angry and ineffectual and disillusioned with marriage, work and life. You get to see the picture through his eyes and also that of his seriously ambitious and disaffected wife.

This is a well written and constructed novel – perhaps too smartly written and well constructed to reflect the mad edginess that it intends to create. But it's a good read and I'd go along with the accolade that it's 'a disturbing and compulsively readable book full of surprise twists and turns'.

Revelations by Mongane Wally Serote deals with the political freedom fighters and how they are coping in post-liberation South Africa.

Yes, these are some of the issues of the other two books, but here there are additional layers. Serote chooses to create a broader canvas, peopled with characters dealing with the stress associated with war as well as the changed times, current attitudes and conflicting belief systems. It's a far more complex and ambitious story that Serote attempts. His characters reflect upon the past as it affects the present and bedevils the future. He certainly raises questions that could help us transcend our racist past and hopefully disempower the many ugly ghosts that continue to creep around.

Unfortunately, I found the writing didactic to the point of tedium. The prose is awkward and declaratory in a very 'teacher knows best' kind of way. So the novel that seemed the most promising was the least rewarding read, despite the author's revered credentials.

Bush of Ghosts certainly proves that a picture is worth a thousand words. It is published by Umuzi and sells for R270.00

Deeper than Colour and *Revelations* are published by Jacana and both priced at R116.00

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