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This powerful and widely acclaimed autobiography of Sindiwe Magona's early years in South Africa, announced the arrival of a major new black writer. Here she gives an account of her eventful first 23 years and tells a candid, unself-pitying story of triumph and endurance in the face of hardships relentlessly reinforced by the apartheid system.

To My Children's Children Details

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From Reader Review To My Children's Children for online ebook

Jay Shelat says

This is an incredible story of an incredible woman. I've had the honor of meeting Dr. Magona, and it is evident that the experiences she tells in this memoir shape who she is today. This book is incredibly powerful in its story of one woman's struggle to support her family (and often times herself) in South Africa. This has ignited a passion for biographies and memoirs. One can become a better person from reading another's story. To My Children's Children is highly recommended!

Liralen says

Magona grew up in South Africa -- mostly in Cape Town -- in the 50s and 60s, when it was ruled by apartheid. Still, she had a happy childhood; her parents were uneducated but determined that their children would have opportunities.

What I didn't expect: Magona is *funny*. She tells her story lightly, not treading too heavily on the times when things were rough, not afraid to poke fun at anyone -- or at herself, both as a child and as an adult. She's biting, too, when it comes to apartheid, and to the laws meant to keep black Africans down.

The book covers only her early life -- up until she was in her early twenties -- and I'd love to know more about how she ended up in the U.S. and writing the way she does. But I suppose that's why she wrote *Forced to Grow...*

Anyway, I'll let the book speak for itself; I folded down a ton of corners as I read:

There was never any question of taking any of the rag dolls to Cape Town with me. Even I knew it would have been ridiculous to take a rag doll to the big big faraway town where there were many many people who were white just like the white people of the shop; where there were tens and tens and tens of motor cars, maybe hundreds, on tar-covered roads; where everyone went by bus or train even if they were going half the distance we traveled on foot going to church every Sunday. Where there were no mud huts but brick and cement and stone houses, their windows made of glass not wood. And the roofs were made not of dull-colored grass but shiny metal; zinc roofs. Where everyone ate meat every day and did not have to wait until there was a feast or one of the cattle was dying or dead before they could have meat. What fool would take a rag doll to such a place? (16)

Except for the thundering of my own heart, not a word had passed between us during the presence of the police. Not a word was spoken after they had left. Knowledge I would hide, for years even from myself, became mine that night: Father's eyes also could house fear. (18)

It is here, too, I learned to read my first word -- VASELINE! (21)

We did not question why it was that the beneficent were invariably white, the beneficiaries invariably black. We had no way of knowing about the broader issues that had given birth to the organization itself, let alone understand its mission, to say nothing of the inadequacy and limitedness of its undertaking. How were we to know that many of these kind ladies were the wives and daughters of the men who paid our fathers peanuts;

fed their dogs T-bone steaks; and ensured our poverty by voting in a government whose avowed task was making certain we would stay servants, serf-like and docile? We were children.[...] We did not even know we were poor. (23)

Perhaps children in other lands played at being kings and queens; we just played at being white. (37)

Mama often regaled us with stories of her youth. Pioneers, I learnt from her, seldom had an easy time. She and a friend had been the subject of much malice in the village when it became known they were "fallen maidens." The demonic deed? They were the first to wear bloomers!

To the village community, where virgins proudly displayed firm breasts, with beaded apron decorously worn over the public area, hiding one's body was a sign of shame. What could these two young girls have done to have to buy something and have to wear it every day? (44)

In severing the education of the African child from that of the white child, the powers that be had announced, in Parliament, that the aim was to ensure that the black child would be protected from frustration; she would not be put through an education that would make her believe she was being prepared to graze the greener pastures. The education that would be given to the African child, the Honorable Dr. Verwoerd had enlightened us, would fit her for her station in life, service to her master, the white man, woman, child, and, in permissible ways, the white economy. Service, not participation, never mind access, would be the operative, the key word. (82)

Christopher and Ian, aged eight and six, respectively, were children with all that entails. They were no saints, to be sure. But, on the other hand, neither were they devilish brats. And, what is more important, as we say in the African townships, they were being brought up. Most white children in South Africa simply grow up. There is no pruning, no tending, weeding or nurturing. They pick up, as the years roll relentlessly on, whatever prevailing societal attitudes, whims and mannerisms might be in the offing. (110)

Later, I was to learn of the white South African woman's anguish upon becoming a working mother. Mine was not the choice of being a working mother or a not-working mother. No, I could choose between being a working mother or having no children left. Whose mother would I have been had my children died from starvation? (133)

Tiah says

I greatly enjoyed this. The writing smoothed out and grew as the story moved along. By the final chapters I was reading the writing style that I've come to love in such works as 'Push-Push.' Perhaps it is due to the difficulty of trying to cram an entire childhood into half a book? Piercing insights into both herself, others and societal behaviour.

Lorraine says

Exceptionally written. Made up of words which had my emotions all over the place.

Mama Sindiwe emptied herself. She poured all which she wanted her grandchildren and great-grandchildren to know. About her beginnings. Her dreams as a girl, young lady, mother, wife and grandmother.

The book is made up of 5 short stories each depicting a stage, a journey of Mama Sindiwe's life. All told in a prose so deliciously fluid that the smudges of Xhosa didn't throw me off. Actually, they added to the narrative.

My first encounter with Mama Sindiwe was a few years ago when m book club was reading "Forced To Grow". I gave it 3 stars. I was judgy and in hindsight, realised that I was too quick to jump to baseless conclusions. I found her account whiney and written from a position of weakness. I forgot that it was "herstory" and she was telling it. I do not apologise but I am more understanding of her actions, feelings then.

"To My Children's Children" is short, only 183 pages long. I found that though it was an easy read, no bombastic words, the diction used packed a punch. I found myself reading reflectively. This book, as much as it is Mama Sindiwe's account of her life to future generations, it also forced me to think of how do I want to be remembered. I'd love to live forever, but at some point, I will be gone and what legacy will I leave for my children's children.

Mama Sindiwe barred all. Hid nothing. Exposed herself to me, the reader. I felt every emotion she was feeling. I walked barefoot with her. I drank fresh cow's milk with her. I performed domestic chores with her. I dreamt her dreams. I wanted her wants. Except for Luthando. Sometimes I questioned her decision making process. I celebrated her wins and cried when she hurt.

The book ends where "Forced To Grow" begins. For a full account, I'd suggest that you read both.

Well done, Mama. My life pales in comparison to yours. I celebrate your resilience and persistence. I celebrate your never-give-up-attitude and your optimistic outlook.

#AsIWaitForItToBePrescribed

iluvteaching says

this was one of the books mike had to read for his race and racism class. he thought i would like it and i did. this is a different point of view about south africa. i thought it was interesting, uplifting, and surprisingly very funny.

Kelsey Demers says

An interesting look into the life of a South African girl and her family/community life as she grows up during Apartheid. While the book is well written start to finish with humorous reflections on her childhood and teenage years, it is her final section and subsequent climax of the story where I feel Magona showed her true talent as a writer, giving a passionate and captivating reflection on her darkest days.

Overall, a very decent autobiography. Recommended for anyone interested in South African/Xhosa culture or life under Apartheid.

LeAnne says

This memoir of growing up Xhosa in apartheid South Africa is very revealing. Magona describes a blissfully ignorant childhood later disillusioned by inter-race relationships. As a white woman currently living in Johannesburg, it forces me to take a second look at all my relationships.

Laurie says

This book is about the early years of the author's life. She is a woman from South Africa who grew up during apartheid. I really enjoyed this book- I also loved her novel, *Mother to Mother*. She writes incredibly well, I love her analogies, metaphors, etc. She has such a powerful voice. I especially appreciated the way it ended- that despite so many trials and hardships, she was able to recognize the blessings she'd received and acknowledged the good people in her community who looked out for her and her family.

Meredith says

Extremely powerful. I really enjoyed seeing a memoir from this period, from this part of the world. I read this for a post-British-colonial class. I never would have picked it up, and for this subject, I'm glad this was on the reading list. It's horrific lawful segregation ever happened... it's especially awful that South African society is still influenced by it, even with the system 'dismantled'... I'm not a scholar on this subject, but I'd love to understand it more. This memoir really opened my eyes to a part of humanity I never knew existed.

Greta says

Wow! Sindiwe Magona writes an amazing memoir worthy of Christmas story of the year for me. She is the first South Africa woman writer I can say, "I love" wholeheartedly and without reserve. Life before and during Apartheid for her was difficult beyond imagination and yet she survived, pursued a teaching education, raised her three children and several younger siblings. Eventually she sees she has never been doing the work all alone, as many helping hands, smiling faces, generous souls kept her and her kin alive.

Nancy says

Just as the description states, this memoir was told in an "unself-pitying" voice. That's what I liked most about it. I kept wondering what the cover meant...why was this woman carrying five animal heads on top of her head? Turns out it was yet another example of how this smart, educated, hard-working woman dealt with everything that life threw in her direction. She wrote this memoir so that her children, and her children's children, would know her story.

I learned a lot and I'm glad I read it.

Nela says

Read it upon returning from a trip to South Africa and loved it! Will move on to Forced to Grow. True - no self-pity, no blame, no bitterness. Just life, as it is/was.

Marilyn says

Guess I have read too many books about South Africa and apartheid. Yes it was awful, but she made several bad choices that she seems to take no responsibility for. At least it was short.

Suzanne says

An amazing look in Xhosa culture! I read this at the end of studying the language for a semester and I wish I had read it at the beginning, it was so informative and interesting.

Magona has a way of writing that keeps you reading until you are done, and then you want more.

Mills College Library says

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