



The Jack Bank: A Memoir of a South African Childhood

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An extraordinary, literary memoir from a gay white South African, coming of age at the end of apartheid in the late 1970s. Glen Retief's childhood was at once recognizably ordinary--and brutally unusual.

Raised in the middle of a game preserve where his father worked, Retief's warm nuclear family was a preserve of its own, against chaotic forces just outside its borders: a childhood friend whose uncle led a death squad, while his cultured grandfather quoted Shakespeare at barbecues and abused Glen's sister in an antique-filled, tobacco-scented living room.

But it was when Retief was sent to boarding school, that he was truly exposed to human cruelty and frailty. When the prefects were caught torturing younger boys, they invented "the jack bank," where underclassmen could save beatings, earn interest on their deposits, and draw on them later to atone for their supposed infractions. Retief writes movingly of the complicated emotions and politics in this punitive all-male world, and of how he navigated them, even as he began to realize that his sexuality was different than his peers'.

The Jack Bank: A Memoir of a South African Childhood Details

Date : Published April 12th 2011 by St. Martin's Press

ISBN : 9780312590932

Author : Glen Retief

Format : Hardcover 288 pages

Genre : Cultural, Africa, Nonfiction, Biography, Autobiography, Memoir, Southern Africa, South Africa, Lgbt, Gbt, Queer



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From Reader Review The Jack Bank: A Memoir of a South African Childhood for online ebook

Gwen says

I expected to really like this. What is not to like about a child that grows up in Kruger Park? However, it ends up being more about his childhood, where he was bullied for being different - and about him finally figuring out that he was gay. His family were English Catholics, which was different than all the other white people. So, he grows up, has trouble making friends, goes to boarding school where he is beaten, goes to college and finds out he is gay. And then, he wants to move to the USA to avoid military. All this occurs during apartheid which is barely addressed in the book.

Jane Brazell says

Retief's telling of his childhood and youth in South Africa is gripping and beautifully written. The ideas presented about bullying are applicable to our current situation. It is also a wonderful look at South Africa.

AJ P says

I really can't decide if I liked this one. I did for the most part - I liked most of the stories told, I generally liked the author, I liked the South Africa part (of course), and I loved the honesty... but there were things I definitely wasn't into, too.

I didn't really understand the title, and I definitely didn't understand why the author had to keep bringing it up constantly. I understood what the jack bank was when it happened in boarding school, but then the author incessantly brought it up as a symbol that I didn't quite get in what seemed like an effort to draw a running theme throughout the book, and it just didn't work for me. I also didn't really need to know about every sexual escapade. I don't mind sex talk, but eh, sometimes I thought it was too much here.

But, overall I don't regret reading it, as I don't regret reading most memoirs (especially out of South Africa), and there was some interesting insight into gay rights in South Africa in the 1980s/early 1990s that I don't know much about. So overall, worth it.

Literature Teacher says

Vivid and beautiful. I may assign it in a postcolonial literature class.

Angela says

Growing up in South Africa: Man, this is going to be *cool*, with wild animals hanging out in your backyard and maybe a lion mauling or something. I pictured lush tree-lined streets on the way to school, boyhood adventures.

Not that my initial expectations were wrong, but there is *so much more*.

Like most children, Glen thinks his childhood is fairly common. We open up with an interviewer who wants to know the gritty details about living on a game preserve, but he talks about his hobbies and his friends instead. It doesn't take long for Glen to realize this is the wrong answer, but he doesn't know *why*. Is he supposed to be different?

He grows up, goes to boarding school, is mentally and physically abused by his peers. But it's not until college—the chapter titled The Castle—that I really got into this tale. Before then, you don't feel the racial and/or sexuality changes that are happening. It's not until Glen befriends a black boy, in the black dorm, that you realize what's happening in South Africa during that time. It paints a picture not just of one boy's life, but of an entire historical movement.

He goes from a clueless boy living in the game reserve to a gay rights activist. And everything in between helps define his identity, those little (and often not-so-little) details that we learn on the way as we grow up.

Brian Reeves says

I don't have much experience with memoir, but this one was great. Written by one of my grad school associates and friends, Glen Retief, *The Jack Bank* tells of his early years in South Africa, in an environment where violence often merges with power and sexuality. Life in an African National Park itself was interesting, but his depiction of the horrors taking place in boarding school was gut-wrenching. The title and back cover only touch on the depth of violence and depravity inflicted upon the lowerclassmen by the seniors late at night when there are no teachers around.

But for me the most interesting part of the book took place toward the end, when as a young gay man in his 20s, Glen lived in Cape Town and dated a man from the ghetto of Soweto, many hours' drive away. Glen has lived a fairly sheltered life (the "Jack Bank" notwithstanding), and has become aware of his privilege and power as a white man, but he is still easily fooled by romanticized notions of how those in poverty live, seeing them as more pure and honest. He moves through the ghetto like a privileged white boy: unaware of danger, unwilling to believe the locals about the reality of the place, and falsely secure in his misunderstanding about his relationships with locals. This all comes crashing down quickly when rivals of the ANC (this was in the early 90s) raid Soweto while Glen is still there.

A great book, which I highly suggest.

Doreen says

Jack bank refers to the hazings/beatings that the author endures while at boarding school. He could 'bank' some of this torture against future 'infractions', real or fabricated. A sophomoric, brutal tradition at the boarding school, Retief suffers from PTSD in the following years because of it.

The memoir spans Retief's childhood in the natural beauty of South Africa, his adolescent and teen years, grappling with bullies and his budding sexuality, and his years as an adult, as he experiments with life, struggling to become himself, whomever that may be. And all this takes place as South Africa struggles to become a better nation; a bill of rights supporting equality for blacks and a ban on homophobic discrimination.

The writing is magnificent; descriptive, honest, raw. It's a personal memoir, but also a brief account of South Africa's blood-shedding in the years during and after Apartheid. Retief is a gifted writer. I highly recommend, "Jack Bank".

Sharon Holderbaum says

Picked this book up in Airport to find out my son had this professor at Susquehanna Univ! Good read!

Corey says

Read this for school and had the opportunity to meet the writer, a really interesting and bright fellow. To be completely honest, I didn't think I'd be all that crazy about the book, it just didn't sound like my cup of tea. But Retief's journey is fascinating and inspiring, not to mention quite well-written. I especially enjoyed the "Black Boys of My Youth" section. Retief's recollections of his adolescence are both amusing and enlightening. Definitely worth a read.

Elizabeth Cole says

Though the stories are incredible, the author's sense of vagueness and perpetual questioning of his own life distracts from the events. It is a story mixed with violence and love, where passion is the underlying theme. It seems to be written as a 250 page monologue, which would be much better served if spoken aloud rather than read.

Cheryl says

Excellent book. I met the author this summer at a reading. Very interesting to learn about what it was like growing up gay in South Africa. This book was especially pertinent last month with the death of Nelson Mandela. He is an excellent writer. Very descriptive memoir. I would highly recommend reading this book.

Peterson Toscano says

Regardless what Retief writes about, his use of language and deep reflection is gripping. Excellent memoir.

There is something for everyone. He offers a meditation on violence from the natural world to the Apartheid state. Moving, insightful, and brilliantly executed. (I read a pre-released version of the book)

Mia says

Retief has a very interesting story to tell, but unfortunately feels the need to hit his reader over the head with his 'theme,' thereby sacrificing the art of subtlety a book like this would really benefit from. It ends up feeling contrived, especially towards the end, which is a shame, as he's a good writer and, as I said, his is a fascinating story.

Lindsey Tate says

Beautifully written, brutally honest memoir about growing up in South Africa during a time of extreme political change. Retief's first years of childhood are spent in the middle of a game preserve, the Kruger National Park, surrounded by exotic animals and impressive landscapes. Yet this paradise hides its own dark shadows: the abuse of his sister by his grandfather, a father's friend involved in state-backed murders - and at the age of twelve when Retief goes away to boarding school any innocence he once knew is left far behind. At school he suffers vicious beatings and psychological torture at the hands of a prefect, incidents that scar him deeply and are carried deep within his psyche as he journeys into the adult world. Fragile and unsure, Retief begins to come to terms with his homosexuality then, against a backdrop of increasing violence and political change, he gets involved with the Gay and Lesbian Association of the University of Cape Town working on a bill of rights for gay and lesbian equality. His personal awakening is reflected in his whole-hearted embrace of everything that is changing in South African society.

Retief's honesty is impressive as is his writing: his ability to convey his excitement at making a childhood friend, his terror and bewilderment during his boarding school years, his heart-rending need for someone to love, the tender moment when he comes out to his parents. Retief's South African odyssey is accessible and universal and well-worth reading.

Liralen says

Combine South Africa, boarding school, and questioning of sexuality -- three book topics that interest me more or less to no end -- and stir. Add a bit of seasoning; stir again. Yay?

What surprised me, I think, was how little the book had to do with the cover copy. I mean, yes, he talks about growing up in a game preserve; he talks about boarding school and the jack bank. But that's more or less where the cover copy ends, leading me to think that that was the focus of the book; as it is, the jack bank is not too much more than an anecdote, and the cover copy only takes us halfway through the book.

Much of my ambivalence about the book, then, stems simply from it not being entirely what I'd expected. The rest stems from a wish that the author had gone *deeper*. He talks about events, and actions, but stops short of examining what they might mean in a greater context or in terms of himself. Take as an example the titular jack bank: (view spoiler) Or, later in the book, race: (view spoiler) I'm not fishing for particular answers in either of these cases -- I can just imagine a number of different answers to each and am consequently curious as to which, if any, might be true.

Interesting book. Misleading copy. Not-entirely-fulfilled expectations.

Chatter on the mythical trifecta here.
