



Stealing Water: A Secret Life in an African City

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Tim Ecott's family swapped Northern Ireland for apartheid Johannesburg in the 1970s. But just six months after arriving, the family was bankrupt and evicted from their home. Funny, witty and affecting, this is a very different African memoir about how the worst of times can become the most valuable period of a person's life. (Warning - may contain strong language)

Stealing Water: A Secret Life in an African City Details

Date : Published March 6th 2008 by Sceptre (first published January 1st 2008)

ISBN : 9780340936627

Author : Tim Ecott

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Cultural, Africa, Autobiography, Memoir



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Belle says

I really enjoy this book. I've read it several times, buying it after originally listening to it on audio. It's a free flowing easy read. Not too long. No thinking required. It entertains me. I find the author quirky, honest and with good humour. While much of the story is set in Johannesburg, after the family had moved there in the 1970's, the author also tells of a short time in Malaysia and also his travels back and forth to Northern Ireland. In truth, while Ecott does convey the situation for poor, English speaking immigrants to South Africa at that time very well and he also describes a Joburg that has long since disappeared, this is more about family than location.

The author's parents were extremely entertaining, not just because of their adventures and off beat personalities but also because they reminded me so much of my own family. Tim's father was an English version of my own father, as in Rambo, and this brought back long forgotten memories. Tim's mom reminds me of myself in many ways which I find very comforting especially with regard to my own children and the traveling back and forth from SA for economic gain. This book is a loving tribute to the author's beloved mother and always leaves me wanting to know so much more.

This will always be one of my favourites that I can enjoy time and again.

Erin says

<https://mybooksareyourbooks.wordpress...>

This book has left me feeling confused. I picked it up as my kindle had no charge and I simply cannot function without my head in a book (ironically). I am unsure as to where to even begin? This book is essentially the story of the author's childhood in South Africa....well that was how it was sold to me. Yet, he spent more time in Northern Ireland. The chapters are not in chronologically order and this is common so did not phase me. I think my main issue with this book is that nothing actually happens, there is no story line and no climax and more often than not a lot of dribble of a memory far from interesting. HOWEVER, the book is written very well and the references as to what Africa was like during the apartheid regime make you flinch with disgust. If you find other people's lives fascinating then perhaps you will appreciate this book.

As a military child he lived in several different locations, with the perks that military accommodation provides, such as a social scene.

Sally Seymore says

I really enjoyed this book by Tim Ecott and can recommend it. It is funny, although quite sad at times - to imagine a child going through a life like this, but then he seems to be the better for it. Through his mom he learnt the value of books and at some point he says his experience made him question the value of material goods. That really made me think and evaluate the importance, or lack of it, in my own life.

Mya says

3.5 stars. Although this is sold as a book about South Africa, it isn't really. It's a story of the author's youth, and this author spent time in Ireland, Malaysia and Johannesburg in his youth, so it's story about all of those places. And, more than that, it's a story about his family. He does mention a lot of Johannesburg locations and so, I always find that my ratings of these kinds of books are tinged with a touch of sentimentality. It's an easy read although I think easier for those with some South African context. I found some bits a little hard to believe, so am not sure how much poetic license was employed, but still enjoyed the tale.

Rachel Ingram says

Love it, devoured it over one weekend and the characters stayed with me ever after. One of the best memoirs I have ever read.

Derek Baldwin says

The sort of mediocre book I'd ordinarily toss aside after three or four dozen pages and the only reason I didn't was sheer nostalgia. The parts of the narrative set in Johannesburg were from a time when I had recently lived there too, and I'd guess the author is roughly my age, so it felt quite like a past of my own and not just his. To read that he lived at Mitchell Court, bang next to the Quirinale hotel, where I spent a lot of time at Mad Gary's, was really cool. The Flea Market, the Mini Cine, the cafes and shops, all were part of my own landscape for a few years, Yeoville too.

If this were the sole setting and he'd made more effort to flesh out some of the characters this could really have been good. But alas this is only about one third of the story (which dots forward and back haphazardly throughout, except maybe the last thirty pages). I basically skipped the rest, rubbish anecdotes about his tedious family and life in Ireland, tiresome film buff trivia, etc.

Disappointing really, and definitely not what the blurb claims it is.

Liz Phillips says

Really enjoyed this book, which has been lying on my to read shelf for a while. Brought back many memories as the places he writes about in central Johannesburg were my haunts during my college year, at around the same period the book is describing. Recognised so many places and experiences. Even used to eat at the Carlton when dad came to visit! Well written and amusing too.

Rachel says

I was drawn to this book as it deals with both South Africa and Northern Ireland - an interesting account of a young man's experience growing up between the two conflicted places, with striking details of daily life, but I felt somehow it struggled to bring in the bigger picture.

Liralen says

The copy's a bit disingenuous, I'm afraid. True to the book, sure, but only a partial picture: Ecott didn't move to Johannesburg until he was 16 or so...and then he moved right back to Northern Ireland to finish up school, spending only summers and some time after graduation in South Africa. So, while interesting -- Ecott has some great stories to tell about his family -- this isn't an 'African memoir'. It isn't even a memoir of Northern Ireland, or of the shift from one culture to another (and back). It's a memoir of growing up with somewhat unconventional parents in changing circumstances (...and of growing up with an obsession with films).

Don't get me wrong -- his family provides ample fodder for an entertaining read. But gosh, given how much was going on in Northern Ireland and in South Africa in the time period he writes about here, I'd expected a lot more out of the setting.

Muphyn says

This book probably wasn't quite what I had expected and the writing style/approach reminded me very much of Bill Bryson (dry humour, commenting on odd facts and people's weird habits) but it was still interesting enough to hold my attention.

Tim Ecott's life was characterised by his dad's career in the British army and most of his early years had been spent abroad. In his teenage years, his family emigrated to South Africa and from then on his life continued to be divided by time spent in South Africa and time back at home in Northern Ireland.

The book gives you an unusual perspective, i.e. a tale of a Irish/British family emigrating to South Africa in the late 1970s and their steady decline into poverty. It's written with much dry humour and wit, discussing the social climate in Jo'burg's suburb Hillbrow in the 1970s and 80s. I suspect that some people might consider "Stealing Water" to be a shallow account of life in SA (Ecott only passingly touches upon the wider social and political issues) but I don't think that was his aim anyway. More a family history and a memoir about, what Ecott considered, his secret, and perhaps shameful, life in Africa.

Robert Davidson says

Very good read. Honest, sometimes funny, sometimes sad Memoir of a young life lived in two very different places. Full of very interesting characters in both N. Ireland and South Africa and especially his own family members who were often hilarious. His parents, despite their many problems encouraged their son to pursue an education and escape their plight. To his credit he did and became a keen observer of people and their situations and how his Parents for all their faults, did love him.

Nic Ayson says

Read but not finished. This was not the book I was expecting. The blurb had me thinking it would be quite something else, a story of a family losing everything in their shift to South Africa and their journey to survive - instead it just seemed like a random jumble of a man's childhood that jumped in no historical order or really made too much sense. Although "some" of the stories were interesting enough the order in which in they were told were so seemingly random it just became confusing and annoying. I abandoned this to move on to greater things.

Hmy says

I was so much looking forward to this story but found it rather dull. The author jumps into his life in Africa and leaves us wondering for too long about the back story.

Nathaniel says

Sometimes it can be difficult to respond in an objective way to a text that is misrepresented so thoroughly that I buy it under false pretences. Because I live in Africa and have lived in Africa for a number of years, I routinely buy the memoirs that are written by others who make Africa their home. But now, such is the frenzy for works about Africa that books are now being marketed as African memoirs even if their subject spends just a handful of extended vacations in Africa during his middle teenage years. "Stealing Water" 'Tis a Memoir.

If I had known this book was primarily about childhood in the United Kingdom with a bit of expat travel thrown in, I might have read it if it was written by someone as talented as Michael Ondaatje or if it was written about some time further back in history. Might. But, after the first hundred pages of this story sauntered along in a tireless effort to balance tickling my funny bone with evoking my sympathies, I started keeping track of how many pages of this "heartbreaking . . . memoir about growing up in South Africa" (I quote the jacket) had anything to do with Africa. Less than 50%.

Now, Ecott was probably not invited to design his own jacket or to sing his own praises; he may be as nonplussed as I am by Emma Thompson's declaration that he is "Dickensian." Certainly, nobody would consider me reasonable or fair for blaming Ecott for living during a time and in places that I find insufficiently gripping. Most of Ecott's book falls on the outside of the small charitable bubble that I maintain for African memoirs and, as such, it suffocates in the near complete lack of interest and patience that I can offer to chuckle-inducing, sympathy-driven, object and date saturated, purposeless post-modern self-presentation. And while I am prepared to read memoirs by people slightly less gifted than Proust or Thomas Bernhard, even down to the skill level of the aforementioned Ondaatje, Ecott's prose neither stretches nor treasures language. And when Ecott does delve into his own style tactics (such as when he constantly references classic movie films by their title and date to give his narrative context), I find it irritating. For whose benefit does an author fill his book with dozens of parenthetical references to already obscure movies?

Let me address the part of this book that I intended to read and that interests me: Ecott's occasional summer vacations in apartheid Johannesburg. Young Ecott occupies a singular position; he is a seriously poor white

non-South African living in dangerous urban areas usually conjured up by White South African authors as harbingers of inevitable South African doom. Ecott's mother slots herself into a hodge podge of quirky, half-sketched, marginal figures all of whom fall outside of the dominant South African white and predominant South African black categories. This menagerie comes into a fuzzy sort of focus, which happily relegates the tedious racial issues of that country to tertiary remarks and observations. It's almost as if Ecott spent his summers at the circus. The unfortunate side-effect is that he has only the most superficial access to the people he encounters, none of whom emerge as fully-fledged characters even though most of them have their fifteen minutes of fame in poignant little vignettes. It would have been fascinating to see how these people shaped his life, if he had grown up in their midst; but as a visiting middle and late teenager, Ecott seemed to spot their entertainment value even as he failed to intuit what place they could have occupied in a more mature narrative.

Though Ecott makes an effort to allow his parents to appear noble and flawed in their parenting and family-making, they are also sketchy in their presence, seen from a distance by an uprooted observer who feigns sharing all, while holding his most powerful cards too close. This means the whole book is powered by kindling and straw. I wanted to sink my teeth into the book and find something to savor; but I just tasted packaging and something like a cheap lemon wafer.

A Post-Script: I only just noticed that some versions of this book come with an expanded title: "A Secret Life in an African City." That might as well have three explanation points after it. Sensational; inaccurate; bad form.

Mary says

Was enjoyable but found the backwards and forwards timeline irritating.
