

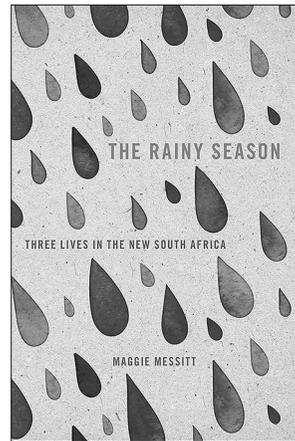
A Corner of South Africa Portrayed with Insight and Appreciation

The Rainy Season: Three Lives in the New South Africa

by Maggie Messitt. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. Paperback, 198 pp., \$19.95

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The Rainy Season, which plunges readers into the remote community of Rooibok in the South African village of Acornhoek, resulted from a remarkable immersion by author Maggie Messitt. She spent ten months in the tiny and seemingly ordinary place after a six-year apprenticeship reporting and living in South Africa. It's not the length of time dedicated to the project that stands out so much as the degree of difficulty it entailed. She collected her material here by disappearing into a place where she was foreign to residents in every possible way. They slipped in and out of three languages, only one of which she could use decently. They were poor and mostly uneducated while she holds an advanced degree from one private college and is working on a PhD in creative nonfiction from Ohio University. They are trapped in the developing world; she operates in the First. And not least, they are black and she white.



She succeeds, however, and ends up standing in for us. We see, hear, smell, and know Rooibok. While Messitt absents herself and is not a character in her book it's hard not to see her listening and watching, building trust, asking probing questions.

The book overflows with minute details. This feels rich and photographic when she is writing about women dressing for funerals and festivals, or the oppressive heat of an overfilled car on a sunny day, or a cement-brick wall falling down on workers. Some of her scenic descriptions are heartfelt but overwrought: "The escarpment that paints the sky like a city in the distance radiated. A deep line of bright pink laced the edges of the rocky, defined features and the tabletop of the mountains. . . ." It goes on longer.

Authentic sounds of the place ring from the book. She uses so many local words (*bakkie*, *muthi*, *sangoma*) that she includes a glossary. As in her descriptions, she almost overdoes the use of onomatopoeia (The sound of rain—"tho, tho, tho" (84); the sound of Regina's shoes—"squish-squash, squish-squash, squish-squash" (85); the sound of a cell phone—"Deedle dee dee dee. . . Deedle dee dee daaa. . ." (115)). And her prose

mimics the cadence of rural Africa—slow, unadorned, repetitive, deliberative.

Messitt paces her narrative to the tempo of village life. For pages on end her three main characters get on with the regular stuff of life, keeping afloat and supporting relatives, coping with bad spouses, just staying alive. Early death from AIDS especially haunts this book as it does the village, with its seven funeral homes within three kilometers and eight cemeteries within a mile radius. Suddenly, while lulled, comes an explosion of scandal or revelation—a suicide, a disclosure of grotesque domestic abuse. Caught up, readers can get why *skinnering*, or gossiping, is vital to these strangers on the other side of the world.

Reading *The Rainy Season* is mesmerizing but difficult. Favorable reviews of it refer to a “multi-threaded narrative” intertwining the lives of three villagers of different ages, occupations, and genders who, in fact, have only distant connections to each other aside from their abode. Organizing all the threads here—three main characters; a handful of themes, including death, sex, and work; timely angles like the AIDS crises and political change in South Africa—had to have been a tall order. Messitt mostly holds it together, but you can see the effort she has put into structuring this work. Outlines should be invisible, but in this book they are not. Aside from the glossary, she gives us a cast of characters like a playbill, a map of the community, a prologue explaining what to expect, chronological chapters arranged by season of the year, under a series of rotating subheads (Thoko, Dankie, Regina), names that tell whose life is in focus at any given point in the book. Apparently for clarification, direct quotations are italicized.

The work still gets away from the author occasionally. On page sixty-eight she begins talking about “another cluster of women” at a funeral. Another? Readers with less than eidetic memory must look back four full pages to find reference to the first cluster.

Nitpicking reviewers might point out also that Messitt’s love of metaphors that connect what she is talking about to Rooibok sometimes goes over a line and annoys. For example, spring gusts dance like children in the street (4) and tension builds “as thick as maize porridge” (44) and the young Thoko has eyes as wide as ripe marulas—which resemble lemons (19).

Put such minor irritations aside, and keep reading. Forgive Messitt small flaws in what is her first book. As someone who has traveled and lived extensively in north and eastern Africa, I confess that I felt a profound sense of *déjà vu* reading this book. What Messitt has produced provides insight and appreciation for Africa rarely available in the United States, where readers tend to favor stories about that continent’s wild animals. She makes people come alive not as victims but as humans like us, with hopes, disappointment, and rare small triumphs. She makes you want to taste their home-brewed beer, to buy their woven tapestries, and to have your fate forecast by a healer armed with a bag of bones. In the final scene of the epilogue, where she finally comes forward into her story, that is what Messitt does.

Thoko, the healer, throws the bones for Messitt. And, out of respect for a foreigner who had tried to understand her and her neighbors, Thoko tells Messitt the whole truth—both the bad and the good—about life. You have the sense the two women already have told us.