The Native Commissioner: A Novel

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As a Native Commissioner through the 1940's to 1960's, George Jameson was responsible for the welfare of the natives' in his appointed region. He prided himself on furthering relations between communities, speaking several tribal languages fluently and developing a reputation as a man to be trusted and sought after for help and advice. With a thriving young family, a devoted wife and a quick succession of promotions, George is proud of everything he has achieved so far, in particular the understanding he is fostering between whites and blacks. Then, in the wake of the 1948 elections, George feels a shift in the Native Affairs Department's agenda. As he is shunted from one outpost to another, his role becoming ever more hopeless, his place in South Africa's future increasingly hazy, he feels the weight of his powerlessness and finds himself fighting off a crippling depression. "The Native Commissioner" is a heart-wrenching portrayal of a kind and conscientious man who felt himself cast adrift under the weight of South African apartheid.

The Native Commissioner: A Novel Details

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Author	:	Shaun Johnson
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From Reader Review The Native Commissioner: A Novel for online ebook

Manjula says

If you want to learn a little bit more about South Africa pre-1994, from a common man's perspective, this is one of those books. Beautifully written. As Sunday Independent, Ireland says 'Worthy to sit on a shelf alongside Alan Paton'

Adam says

"*Winner: Best Book in Africa Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2007*". "Our past fascinatingly unpacked…penetrating fiction", wrote Nadine Gordimer. These are just two of the numerous encomia printed on the cover of the Penguin edition of Shaun Johnson's novel, "*The Native Commissioner*." This is praise indeed.

So, who am I to criticize such a highly acclaimed novel?

It does not matter because I intend to do so.

Other South African winners of the prize mentioned above include: André Brink (2004), Damon Galgut (2004), Nadine Gordimer (2002), and JM Coetzee (1995). I don't believe that Shaun Johnson's writing in this book is on the same level as that of these authors.

The book is described as a novel. So, it is fiction.

It is a fictional biography of George Jameson, an invented person. Sam, one of his invented sons opens a well sealed cardboard box some time after his widowed mother dies. It contains much documentation including letters, newspaper cuttings, photographs, and tape recordings. Sam reads through this mass of material and uses it to reconstruct the life of his father, whom we first encounter in the opening pages of the book in the ward of a hospital in Durban (South Africa). The author's hero, 'George', who is a good linguist, and knows several African languages, is employed as an administrator of 'native' (i.e. black) Africans. As the years draw on and the Nationalists come to power (in 1948), George reluctantly becomes drawn into the web of Apartheid, carrying out official instructions from his superiors, which he finds are becoming increasingly repugnant to his liberal mind. His health begins to suffer…

All of this is well and good, and makes for a good tale. However, the book irritated me.

If this book were about a real person and based on actual, rather than invented, family memorabilia, I would have rated it as an excellent biography. But, instead it is based on material invented by the author in order to describe, in an original way, aspects of the history of race relations in South Africa before and during the Apartheid era. This format jarred with me. Had the author based his story on a real person using actual documentation, I would have found the book far more powerful. During my reading of "The Native Commissioner", I felt that I was being presented with a user-friendly history lesson rather than a work of fiction.

Pages 181-184 of my edition contain the text of a lecture about the Bantu languages delivered by George Jameson. Interesting as this is per se, it demonstrates, as does much of the rest of the book, the fruits of the

author's research, but is it the stuff of novels? In a novel based on research, I would hope that the author's findings are seamlessly integrated into the body of the story instead of being hurled at you as is the case in this book.

In Two Lives, based on real rather than imaginary research, Vikram Seth manages to achieve far more successfully what Johnson may have been attempting to do in his *"The Native Commissioner"*.

On page 197, we get to read the words that George records whilst on an aeroplane, flying from Johannesburg to Lisbon in late 1967: "*… because South Africans are not allowed to travel over other Africa territories - even at thousands of feet up!*" A reader in the twenty-first century might not have known about this, but the audience for which the reader understands that this tape recording was intended, George's sons in particular, would surely not have needed to have been told this. I could go on, but suffice it to say that there is far too much explanatory information in the imagined documents. Much of this may be necessary for today's readers, but surely most of it would have been unnecessary for those in the thick of things in the South Africa of the 1960s.

Here is just one more of my many other gripes about this book. On page 74, when Mrs Jameson learns that George is about to be sent to a new post in South West Africa (now 'Namibia') in 1948, she felt, "*… as if she was being sent to some awful gulag…*" I believe that Solzhenitsyn introduced that acronym, *gulag*, into common English usage when his "*Gulag Archipelago*", which was initially translated into English in the early 1970s, was published in the West. So I feel that it is extremely unlikely that 'gulag' would have been a word used in South Africa in 1948.

Although I was not keen on Shaun Johnson's book, it was not all bad. Despite my dislike of his format, the story did keep me reading (and occasionally fuming with rage) until the end.

PS: I feel that I am being charitable giving this book 2 stars instead of 1.

Sara says

This was a great book to learn a little about South African history without feeling like I was reading a text book!

Christopher Buchanan says

Very well written

Donald Schopflocher says

In so many of the best books, the large events, the ones that really cause the action, are present only as hints, as troubling storm clouds. So it is here in the life story of a good man destroyed in the service of his country in its dark times. Gentle, simple, alive, but a more scathing indictment of apartheid South Africa will be difficult to find. In approaching this novel, it certainly does help to know a lot about the history of South Africa.

Milan says

After finishing this terrible, drawn-out book -- or rather, short story with a myriad of pointless details thrown in solely so it may be classified as a "novel" due to its page count -- I feel numbed, brain dead, violated due to its most intense ability to be unfathomably boring and, simply, perfectly pointless.

Zein says

Who is South African and what does it mean to be South African are the questions at the center of this compelling novel that tells the life story of George Jameson, a bureaucrat working in South Africa during the implementation and solidification of Apartheid. Some of the other reviews discount this novel because it is not realistic enough (but it's fiction) or that it tells the tired story of a South African who, like many white liberals, chose to do nothing in the face of rising institutionalized social stratification. To my reading, this book is exactly the opposite. By posing the narrative as a memoir reconstructed from the archived papers of a deceased father, the novel self-consciously engages provocative questions about archive, history, and narrative. Furthermore, the use of fiction allows the author the room to provide important facts about South Africa to answer the question of how it is that Apartheid came into existence and its consequences. For instance, woven into the story is the fact that there was no television until 1976 so the government could maintain a tight grip on censorship, in the 1960s South Africans can't fly over some African nations due to political umbrage with Apartheid, English authorities hold up South African travelers when entering the UK, authorities confess that they will promote only Afrikaners to preserve political hegemony, and, most of all, that during the 20th century, some white South Africans began to question what it meant to be African, often with painful realizations about their complicity with oppression, merely by living in South Africa. In sum, I found this novel brilliant and worthy of the praise it has received.

Sarah-Kim says

I liked this book for the way in which it encompasses South Africa, and the ways in which George, the main character, is very real and relatable; he has ordinary ambitions and hobbies and loves languages and people. He gets swept up in life, into a political machine, and rambles from corner to corner of the country, family in tow. I imagine this rambling-ness is what's boring to so many, who want fireworks in their books. I found the tension slowly builds; the ebbs and flows of Georges life become deeper and more violent, the more stable he tries to be. In some places you wish you could give him a hug.

I write from the perspective of someone who has lived in South Africa, and so I doubt my reasons for disliking the book are relatable to most. I found the descriptions of what George is struggling with a little lacking; he's made to enforce policies he can't stand, but I think there's relatively little explanation of how this gets under George's skin and consumes him day by day: we're told it does and have to take the author at his word for it, being reminded about it sporadically. I understand that this dislike is simply the style of the book and my preferences and, if you're interested in learning more about how quickly South Africa changed in the past century, from a white man's perspective, then this is a decent window.

Baratang says

I do not know what kind of emotions or questions the author thought the book would evoke in the readers, particularly South Africans. However, I found the Jameson's issue trivial. The main character came from a well to do family and had freedom of choice throughout his life, including choosing a wife, entering and leaving a career path. I felt that the "problems" he had with the political cloud he found himself in later in life were not so much about the fateful historical invasion of Africa, colonisation and apartheid; but its overtness and how it was conducted. He blatantly said the Africans were not ready to rule without them as though the subjects willingly subscribed to the way of life and type of governance that came with colonisation, and asked for their assistance and mentoring. He studied Africans, learned their languanges and marvelled at narrating his "understanding" of the natives to his own kind, and being the man to consult on native issues. Like any good researcher, he recognised that artifacts should not be ruined any further than the state they were in, for they were of great value to his mission. In addition, he loved his subjects docile and behaving, that is why he was disturbed by one accused man in his court.
Granted, the main character had concerns about the system; but he never came out to opposse the people's oppression outrightly. His own bread and butter issues came first. If not familial, his health challenges were caused by guilt.

Ray Hartley says

Shaun Johnson's The Native Commissioner is a brilliant semi-biographical take on the mental collapse of a man working first under the paternalistic regime of Jan Smuts and later under the less generous bureaucrats of apartheid. Based on Johnson's father, Georg Jameson has to solve the problems under the category "native affairs" - what to do with and eventually about black South Africans who were needed for their labour but not wanted in the political system of apartheid. His mental breakdown is accelerated by his growing realisation that the system in which he operates does not share his love and admiration for the people he is supposed to serve. A great South African book that confronts apartheid's unwritten assault on those who found themselves inside the system but burdened by conscience.

Sue says

I was profoundly moved by this novel; I actually wanted to give it 4,5 stars but gave it full marks instead. I couldn't put it down. Johnson's style is direct, simple, strong, with no artifice, but great pathos comes through: surely the best kind of writing - I became an instant fan and hope he'll write something else. His evocation of the life of an ordinary white South African family in the 50s and 60s,the changing landscapes, their everyday battles and aspirations, is very moving. The father, an African linguist and humanitarian, is trapped working within the ugly machine of apartheid bureaucracy. With dreams foiled and a compromised self-image, tragedy follows.
The story is driven by the narrator's unpacking of his mother's sealed box of memories and moves from near-present, to the past, and back to the present - with a very tidy ending, but the suggestion that family demons have not entirely been put to rest. The story was so convincing in its details that I felt sure it was at least partly autobiographical.
Compulsory reading for any S African of our generation.

Graham Heslop says

A wonderful and vital piece for the 21st century South African. Shaun Johnson raises difficult questions about identity; eviscerates apartheid philosophy; paints a vivid picture of South Africa in the 50s and 60s; and powerfully draws you into the life and mind of this evocative story.

Fictional or not, George Jameson makes a striking impression and leaves an indelible mark on the reader. He embodies the immense strength of the human spirit, which is inevitably broken by systematic evil and unrealised ambitions.

Stephen Hayes says

One of the things about growing up in South Africa is that one reads a lot of books published elsewhere in the world, and so the settings are unfamiliar, but this book comes far closer to home, in time, in place, and even in people.

A man opens a box left by his father, George Jameson, who had died when he was 8 years old, and tries to reconstruct his father's life and his own family history. In this the book reminds me of A recessional for Grace by Margurite Poland. One of the similarities is that the protagonist in that book was researching the life of a Xhosa linguist, making a study of the terms for different kinds of cattle, and in The Native Commissioner the protagonist is fluent in Xhosa, Zulu and Afrikaans as well as English, his native language, so it is difficult to avoid comparisons.

The father was a civil servant, and, like many civil servants, was subject to numerous transfers in the course of his career, and most of those places I was familiar with, having passed through them many times. George Jameson was born to a white farming family in Babanango, and when I lived in Melmoth 35 years ago I regularly visited a farming family there. Jameson was stationed at Tsumeb in Namibia, and at Libode in Transkei, which I passed through on the way to visit my mother when she worked at St Barnabas Hospital, Ntlaza. So it was easy to picture the places and the settings.

Also, I could not help picturing the protagonist as being like Buller Fenwick, a retired Native Commissioner I knew in Melmoth. When I knew him he was doing odd jobs for various people, and would come to us for photocopies, because back in 1979 we had the only photocopier in Melmoth. He was an interesting bloke, and confirmed in real life one of the things that is central to the story. Before the Nats came to power in 1948, his job as a Magistrate and Native Commissioner was to administer justice -- white man's justice to people of a different culture, to be sure, but justice nonetheless. After the Nats came to power the nature of the job changed; it was no longer to administer justice, but to administer government policy. And that is the central dilemma faced by the protagonist in this book, which eventually drives him to a nervous breakdown.

The book is therefore, at one level, true to life. It can give an authentic picture of what life was like for some people in South Africa in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. But was only like that for a relativly small proportion of people -- white civil servants who had doubts about the morality of the National Party policy juggernaut, where the alternatives, if you did not jump on the bandwagon, were to get out of the way or get crushed. Jameson tried, but failed, to get out of the way, and got crushed.

The method of telling the story, reconstucting a life from documents, has its disadvantages, however. I know

from my own interest in family history how difficult it is with real people -- it is all so fragmentary, and there are so many loose ends. Using such a technique in a work of fiction is unnecessarily limiting, though I think Magurite Poland handled it better than Shaun Jameson does. In this case it leaves too much of the story untold.

For example, the narrative tells us that "On the 5th of September he sends a reply to the Johannesburg head office regarding its instruction to repatriate one Buthi Mngomeni to his homeland. Unfortunately, writes my father curtly, your order cannot be acted on as neither we nor he know where his homeland is."

In real life biography, coming across such correspondence in the archives is pure gold. It speaks volumes to the researcher. It portrays exactly the impersonal bureacratic cruelty of the apartheid system, treating human beings who have names, like Buthi Mngomeni, as non-persons, as mere "human resources" (why is that obscene term still in such common use?) And it tells you of a civil servant who is *gatvol* of the whole system, who has had it up to here.

But the average reader of a novel is not a historical researcher, easily able to tease out the significance of such documents. Many people, especially white people, lived through that period with very little clue about what was going on there, and so its significance would escape them. Those who were born after 1980, or those who have never been in South Africa, unless exceptionally well-read, would miss it altogether.

The fiction writer has the opportunity to tell the story fully, to show Buthi Mngomeni as a real person with a life, with a family. It could be expanded to a paragraph, a page, a whole chapter even. But the "documentary research" format does not allow it.

So while one can say that the story is true to life, it is what apartheid was really like for some people, it gives only a tiny fragment of the picture. There is also much more to the story than this.

Ra says

The story is mildly interesting and won an important award. It is, however, rich in details and thin on events. I agree with one reviewer that this is a short story with a great amount of detail.

Nikolaus Geromont says

Johnson's **The Native Commissioner** tackles mostly important and unresolved moral issues, namely those associated with the injustices of South Africa's Apartheid. This may act as a rewarding experience to several readers; however, the plot via which the author expresses his opinions is insipid, somewhat unoriginal and unforgivingly boring. He could've composed a better work by altering his basic technique in writing, and compressing his novel to an amount of, say, 30 pages. Disappointing.
