



Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa

By HEDLEY TWIDLE. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2019. 265 pp. ISBN 978 1 847 01188 6.

Karl Van Wyk

To cite this article: Karl Van Wyk (2020) Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa, South African Historical Journal, 72:2, 352-357, DOI: [10.1080/02582473.2020.1777192](https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2020.1777192)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2020.1777192>



Published online: 04 Sep 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 14




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Note

1. Susan Williams, *Who Killed Hammarskjöld? The UN, The Cold War and White Supremacy in Africa* (London: C. Hurst, 2011), chs 17, 18.

Chris Saunders
University of Cape Town
 chris.saunders@uct.ac.za

© 2020 Chris Saunders
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2020.1774639>



Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa. By HEDLEY TWIDLE. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2019. 265 pp. ISBN 978 1 847 01188 6.

Truth finds itself under threat. That it is under threat at all is not new. Yet with the advent of new technologies, particularly those that allow for varying modes of being and expression, information both personal and political are susceptible to trickery and misrepresentation. Histories are altered, deliberately misunderstood, or forgotten. Events are lied about or described or understood without context. Information about oneself or others may easily be orchestrated to suggest extraordinary realities. It is an age often referred to as ‘post-truth’, where the felicity of claims matters less than how they are manufactured, packaged, and the extent to which they are distributed – their global reach. We witness this the world over.

South Africa’s own relationship to truth is profound, though not to the extent that we find ourselves exceptionally or historically exempt from the world’s current crisis of truth. Just over 20 years ago, truth was under scrutiny as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established as perpetrator and victim were invited to offer their faces, voices, and personal stories about their apartheid experiences. Determining truth became the TRC’s objective. This was perceived as an attempt to begin to negate or address the narratives of the preceding political era, one that perpetuated and sustained its dominance by a skilled control over information, by lying.

Hedley Twidle’s excellent new book, *Experiments with Truth*, published in 2019 by James Currey, is an academic work that locates itself within this milieu. It is his second book, the author once again finding himself meditating on postmillennial South Africa as he did in his first work, *Firepool*, a collection of essays.¹ His specific focus in his new work is on narrative non-fiction of the present South African moment. Twidle interrogates several issues that describe the points at which narrative form, history, and truth meet. At the centre of this interrogation is ‘I’, the pronoun subjected to the most scrutiny in his work where it is used to identify the individual among a national collective.

Twidle’s timescape is referred to as the ‘post-TRC [...] in which much of the narrative non-fiction of the past decades has already begun to look like a historical phenomenon’ (xi). He states one of his aims within the first few pages:

[The book] seeks to understand how specific literary encounters and cultural texts are woven into the trajectory of individual lives; and how certain forms of reflective non-fiction [...] are able to rehearse the intimate and sometimes arbitrary 'backstory' of how one comes to know what one knows, and think what one thinks. (ix)

The book is comprised of 10 neat chapters, each focused on one or two specific figures within a specific history. The times that inform the book are those that lie at the outskirts of orthodox history and the orthodox narratives that accompany them. The texts of interest are based on nearly forgotten figures as well as those figures firmly established in the South African historical imagination.

The selection of texts is necessarily eclectic (Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* and *Askari*, Penny Siopis's film *Obscure White Messenger*, Thabo Jijana's *Nobody's Business*, Jonny Steinberg's *Three-Letter Plague*, among others). This is a productive choice, as the texts have little in common with each other except that they all represent lives in South African history that have been transposed into narrative form, each life (or collection of lives) also used as a means of providing insight into a specific aspect of contemporary South Africa. It is interested in these lives, too, as they function as conduits into the broader national history to which they speak, and the particular kind of historiography (the writing of history) they seek to overwrite.

The book's title in full is *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa*. Twidle uses the word *Experiments* to describe those kinds of narrative that in both form and content do not offer easily consumable information. They are the kinds of narrative that speak of unexpected and unusual histories in unexpected and unusual ways. For example, he observes the life narratives of Demetrios Tsafendas as is told by artist Penny Siopis's 2010 film *Obscure White Messenger*. The title comes from the phrase used by Mandela in his *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) to describe the man who would assassinate apartheid Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in the House of Assembly in 1966.² Twidle reads the phrase, *obscure white messenger*, as one in which Mandela quickly dismisses Tsafendas in a way that is indicative of an author who cannot conveniently fit the fact of this man into a life narrative about the defeat of apartheid. Indeed, authors have found it difficult to classify Tsafendas, particularly into categories of race (coloured or white), nationality (Mozambican, South African, Egyptian, or Greek), or political affiliation (anti-apartheid activist or mad man). The case of Tsafendas, and the film thereof, bring to light a curious meeting of the kind of personality in South African history called to mind most readily in the South African imagination with the kind that is not.

Twidle's argument here is that we ought not to dismiss those in South African history who are inconvenient, those who are not immediately useful to the historiographical template we have constructed. We should instead interrogate why such histories have been suppressed in the national psyche to begin with. It is clear early on that the book is not only an aesthetic appreciation and interrogation of the mode concerned (though, depending on his execution, that may have been sufficient). There is a political bent to this as well. In part, the book seeks to advocate and argue against those narratives of individuals and the past that are 'usable'. These are narratives that are convenient, easily digestible, and fit into a prescribed idea about South Africa and its component parts. As Twidle sees it,

a too easily usable past carries a more dubious charge [...] It is a moment when the decolonial impulse to retrieve previously unvoiced histories can be co-opted by new

forms of distorting nationalism; and when even the most self-confidently progressive engagements with the archive might risk ‘using’ [...] past existences that should properly retain more resistance to the designs of the present. (13–14)

Through Twidle’s analysis of a text such as Siopis’s, we are provoked into asking what challenges such disruptive narratives offer our orthodox version of history.

Twidle turns also to those gigantic South African figures who have found themselves at the centre of biographies, seeking within these texts the underlying assumptions about our relationship to our history. Thabo Mbeki features in an analysis of Mark Gevisser’s book, *A Dream Deferred*, about the ex-president’s life. And Nadine Gordimer is the subject of Ronald Suresh Roberts’ contentious *No Cold Kitchen*. Roberts’ text, as Twidle explains, began as a project authorised by its subject, but, as publication was imminent, Gordimer infamously distanced herself from the project based on the inclusion of undesirable material: her attitudes to Israel; unflattering comments on Doris Lessing; sensitive information about her husband and her married life. Wisely, Twidle simply acknowledges the scandal without dwelling on it – it is not why we’re here – using the book instead to interrogate the fundamental nature of biographical writing itself, and the strange relationship (to echo the language of the chapter heading in which this discussion appears) that often develops between biographer and subject.

Virginia Woolf’s 1942 essay, ‘The Art of Biography’, a canonical meditation in the field of biographical writing, is relied upon at various points throughout Twidle’s book (as well as Hermione Lee’s biography of Woolf, herself).³ In his reading of Roberts’ text on Gordimer, Twidle focuses specifically on Woolf’s assertion that a biography ought to document change rather than stasis, or how things progress and digress, rather than provide a litany of linear facts. Twidle is ultimately critical of Roberts. He is sincerely interested in how Roberts employs fictive techniques in reading Gordimer’s life, but shows also how Roberts’ writing loses care and subtlety as it progresses, perhaps because of the spectacular falling out between the two in the final stages of the publishing of the biography. It is an interesting observation, and one that speaks to the heart of the biographical project, of writing of a life with fairness, where the writerly intimacy between parties becomes compromised when the biographer implicates him or herself in the critique of the subject.

The *Narrative Non-fiction* part of the title refers, in its broadest sweep, to those texts in which authors have constructed a story about a real event, or, as concerns this book, a real life lived (as observed in the examples mentioned above). Yet it is a term the author uses with some reluctance, recognising the inevitable slippage in a dogged adherence to literary classification. To work against such prescriptive terms, Twidle reads what would typically be called non-fiction alongside what would typically be called fiction, hoping to discover something productive in this counterpoint, though foregrounding the concerns in this approach:

The challenge, however, is to do this without dissolving or disavowing the specific truth claims of various modes [...] How, in other words, can one recognise that the experience of reading fiction and non-fiction are different, but also acknowledge the fictive lineaments within even the most truth-directed forms. (8)

This careful thought runs throughout the author’s work, though his message never strains under the weight of laboured analysis of the people in which Twidle is interested, or the histories to which they are tethered.

The TRC has often been used as a focaliser of South African history. Twidle finds himself contributing to a fairly established line of academic analysis that takes into account the TRC as one of the country's last major turning points; it was an event that demonstrated a shift in South African attitudes towards ourselves, race, and our history. It is certainly Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (first published in 1998) and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night* (2003) to which all writing on the TRC is obliged to respond.⁴ And Twidle's book is no exception as he refers to these works in the first few pages, citing them as prompts for his preoccupations. They are described as works that were 'Hungry for sincerity and emotional honesty but suspicious of overbearing truths' (4). From here, Twidle moves on to those works produced in and beyond the second decade of democracy, those 'more distant and recessed forms of accounting for the unfinished business of the transition' (4).

That he is interested in what we do not know rather than what we do, or that which has not yet passed into national memory rather than what has, Twidle's work is aligned more closely to the studies of, say, Derek Hook and his 2013 *(Post)apartheid Conditions*.⁵ As a psychoanalytic academic, Hook provides a study in response to the TRC testimonies. Where the TRC offered national (and international) recognition and acknowledgement of those who testified their experiences, narrating their hurt, victimisation, torture, perpetration, Hook is interested in the thousands and perhaps millions of stories of victimisation, humiliation, and torture that had not enjoyed the attention of the state, becoming only a half story as it remains without listener or reader. Twidle works within similar terrain as he operates in response to these half stories.

The book ends as and when it should, with a discussion on the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF) movements and the personal histories that have emerged from them. The book's final two chapters are also its most challenging as the author attempts to bring shape to these movements whose narratives and the repercussions thereof are still in flux. It is also this section that includes some of the more radical choices of text for analysis, particularly in the former half of the penultimate chapter: lectures and performative essays by Panashe Chigumadzi, Sisonke Msimang, and Lebo Mashile from Wits University's Ruth First Lectures of August 2015. The inclusion of these kinds of text demonstrates a logical coherence with Twidle's objectives - they are formally and generically disruptive, and Twidle's project demonstrates that one's reading of a book hinges in part on one's understanding of the form of the work consumed. The latter half of the chapter focuses on two memoirs by authors of the 'born free' generation: those born around 1994, the year that marked South Africa's first democratic elections. The memoirs are Malaika wa Azania's *Memoirs of a Born Free* and Thabo Jijana's *Nobody's Business*.⁶ These are perhaps among Twidle's youngest authors, and they appear in the section of the book that feels the most politically pressing. Indeed, perhaps appropriately and predictably, the impetus to restructure and rework the past (into something more challenging and discomfiting) has been instigated by South Africa's youth, the demographic of people for whom the future means most, the demographic who have the most purchase on the future.

The works and attitudes of South Africa's born free generation have been attacked at a time in which this generation was at its most spectacularly vocal: during the RMF and FMF movements. Critics, such as Achille Mbembe, often stated that the generation and its most prominent members lacked the necessary sophistication of

thought and critical engagement called for by the profound moment in history in which they found themselves. Emotions and emotional critiques replaced reason. But, at least as far as his reading of these born free works go, as we see, for example, in the case of Chigumadzi's work, Twidle is more sympathetic, less dismissive, tries in earnest to engage seriously with a serious author who, herself, speaks of her identity not only as a Black woman but also as a reader aware of the cultural codes and literary dogmas with which she had to contend growing up. To a large extent, Twidle counters the arguments made against her and her generation: 'Contra to the dismissals of personal narrative as a self-indulgent [...] reflex that undermines larger social analysis, this discursive essay infuses the autobiographical into the critical in an intellectually productive way' (194).

There is an obvious thematic omission from the book: life writing on or by feminist Black women. It becomes explicitly clear in one's reading, particularly as the book is interested in so many of the other poignant matters of post-TRC South Africa: xenophobia; racism; the intersections of political and personal truth. In the book's Afterword, Twidle, without shying away from this omission, discloses that such a chapter almost entered the final product, where works by authors such as Pumla Gqola, Miriam Tlali, and Noni Jabavu would have featured prominently. But he 'decided to abandon the half-written chapter: how could I meaningfully respond to or adjudicate on such registers of experience?' (220): 'my attempt to engage Black feminist life writing showed me that there are limits to what can be technically accomplished' (221).

Twidle's reasons for the omission are considered. Yet it is precisely because they are so thoughtful (written about over several pages) that one may feel at a loss for the sophistication and care the author would have brought to the subject. Indeed, it is this sharp and insightful analysis that informs the entire book, a quality that sustains one's interest throughout, to speak more broadly of my appreciation of this brilliant work.

Twidle has not chosen an easy task. To write on the contemporary moment brings with it always the most obvious challenge: the present is fleeting, a moving target. Its sound is shrill and distorted. This is occasionally reflected in the life writing (and the responses it garners) that finds itself at the centre of this book. Yet Twidle handles these various challenges with deft. Through clear, subtle, and empathetic arguments, Twidle is able to find form and pattern in the present South African moment and the life writing that informs it.

Notes

1. H. Twidle, *Firepool: Experiences in an Abnormal World* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2017)
2. N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Randburg: Macdonald Purnell, 1994), 417.
3. V. Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942).
4. A. Krog, *Country of My Skull* (London: Vintage, 1999); P. Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night: A Story of Forgiveness* (Cape Town: David Philips, 2003).
5. D. Hook, *(Post)apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2014).

6. M. wa Azania, *Memoirs of a Born Free: Reflections on the Rainbow Nation* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2014); T. Jijana, *Nobody's Business: A Taxi Owner, a Murder and a Secret* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015).

Karl Van Wyk
University of the Witwatersrand

✉ Karl.vanWyk@Wits.ac.za

© 2020 Karl Van Wyk

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2020.1777192>



Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876–1932. By BRAIN WILLAN. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2018. xxiv + 711 pp. ISBN 978 1 431 42644 7.

Amongst the numerous historical figures neglected by historians during the years of apartheid, Sol Plaatje is considered as a ‘notable casualty’. A number of attempts to document the life of Plaatje have been made, most notably that by Seetsele Modiri Molema, who wrote a biography of Plaatje in the Setswana language, which was translated into English by D.S. Matjila and Karen Haire, consisted of 160 pages and was published in 2012.¹ Willan’s first attempt at producing a biography on Plaatje resulted in the publication of *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (Heinemann Educational Books) in 1984.² The 2018 biography started as an update of the biography published in 1984, but soon the whole book was rewritten. According to Willan he had ‘been able to uncover far more new evidence and information than I had imagined possible, shedding new light on almost every aspect of his life’ (xxii).

Although Plaatje was born in the Boshof district in what was then the Orange Free State Boer Republic, he spent most of his youth at the Pniel Mission, which was established by the Berlin Mission Society near the town of Barkley West in what is today the Northern Cape. Plaatje showed great potential as a young scholar, with a particular gift for acquiring languages. The missionary-educated Plaatje’s highest education was that of Standard Three, equivalent to Grade Five of today. Yet despite his limited education, Plaatje’s literary and other contributions far exceed most of his contemporaries in significance.

Plaatje started his public career working in the Post Office in Kimberley from 1894 to 1897, delivering telegrams. The work required a reasonable degree of literacy, but did not attract any white labourers at the time, as the work was considered too menial and the remuneration too low. The book documents Plaatje’s work at the Post Office as well as his involvement in the social life of Kimberley. It was during this time that two significant events took place for Plaatje. Plaatje’s father passed on in 1896 and in 1898 he married Elizabeth M’belle. The couple soon had children and Plaatje, looking to increase his income, applied to work as a court interpreter in Mafeking (today Mahikeng).

Because of the established practice of the Cape Colonial native franchise at the time, large numbers of black South Africans supported the British during the South African War (1899–1902). Although described as a white man’s war, black South Africans very quickly found themselves used in the conflict by both the Brits and Boers. It was