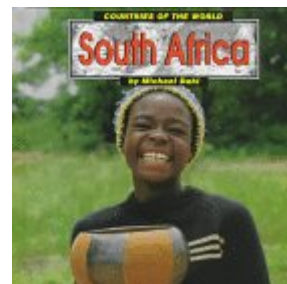




**Michael Dahl.** *South Africa.* Mankato, Minn.: Bridgestone Books, 1998. 24 pp. \$14.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56065-739-2.



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## Puzzling over Pieces of South African Truths

This book is suitable for children just beginning to read non-fiction and to broaden their awareness of the world around them. It presents aspects of South Africa in a clear and precise manner and contains a fair selection of richly coloured photographs. The contents focus on a wide range of details characterising the country, from basic facts and simple historical insights to glances at the pastimes of South Africans and their pedestrian habits. It is a small book, designed for small hands, and the layout of the information is presented in an unambiguous and easily digestible fashion. The cover bears a nice bold photographic image, representing a strong sense of the country and its children.

South Africa, with its current multiplicity of political levels and media presence, embodies a very difficult set of issues to teach to young children. Accordingly, the inclusion of it in a project study of this nature is very complex. In these terms, there are a number of levels which could have been addressed differently, for instance, the political bias inherent in words such as “tribe”—primarily in terms of the (North American) child’s understanding of racial-cultural discrepancies and the history of this word.

Furthermore, it is problematic that the language

demonstrated at the end of the book is Afrikaans. Given the dynamic linguistic currents through which this country is presently developing, it may have been more instructive to represent either one of the “black” languages in a similar context or the pidgin melange of all three options, which developed out of mine-working culture, *fanagalo*.

There are also a couple of areas which are neglected in a broadly conceptual understanding of South African roots, such as the mines, which form a very intrinsic aspect to an understanding of South African wealth and culture, and its history of discrimination. This is juxtaposed with an imposed limit on general information of different areas which would be suitable for discussion at this level—obviously due to the size of the publication—but there are a couple of further areas neglected which could well have been included, such as Kwaito music culture, Kruger National Park, and Gold Reef City, to name a few. Another important concept of an African awareness is that of its visual culture, which is only dealt with in a cursory mention of colour symbolism in the national flag. South African culture is represented by a vast and developing plethora of visual language—from Western aesthetic constructs, to the unique and beautiful rendering

of traditional utilitarian objects.

Some of the facts contained in this publication are misleading. This is exemplified firstly by the Krugerrand incorrectly being shown as the local currency. Also, education is not free in South Africa, as it is categorically stated on page 11. There are also errors in the Afrikaans spelling: *braiis* should read *braais*; *asebblif* should read *asseblief*.

In addition to neglected areas among the contents, there are some arbitrary choices in focus—be it in photographic or descriptive material. These editorial decisions may sway the understanding of the young reader towards something of an adventurous or culturally sexist nature which does not necessarily comply with the facts and thus with the implied intention of the publication. Photographically, there is no representation of girls—in school or in sport. In terms of descriptive material, the problem is exemplified by the assertion that the Drakensberg is snow-covered. It presents powerful visual allusions and information which is factually incorrect, as snow on the mountain tends to be sparse and seasonal—and snow skiing is not considered a sport in this country (although grass skiing is a popular pastime). A similar issue with regard to penguins swimming with people along some Cape Town beaches creates an idyllic image. There is a seal island alongside the Cape Town coast, but the relationships between people and amphibious mam-

mals are basically non-existent: the Cape coastline, during seasonal periods is highly commercialised and very popular which would make this type of “call to nature” unfeasible.

The hands-on game illustrated in this book is not among the more dynamic that this country may have to offer. As with the introduction of an indigenous language, games played using more mainstream traditional, improvisational and dynamic skills could rather have been invoked.

A short bibliography (of American-published documents), together with some website references for the reader who wants to learn more about the country, are supplied at the end of the book.

On the whole this book does convey a sense of South Africa to the young North American reader. It construes a set of images and attempts to assemble a cohesive image as simplistically descriptive of a truth as is appropriate. However, if a level of factual purism is of total relevance in a project of this nature, it must be acknowledged that there are gaps in the material.

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