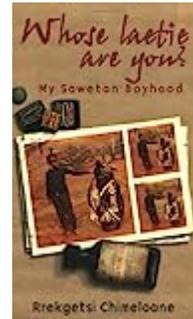




Rrekgetsi Chimeloane. *Whose Laetie Are You? My Sowetan Boyhood.* Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001. 136 pp. \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7957-0123-8.



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Published on H-SAfrica (June, 2002)

Vignettes of a South African Childhood

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Memoirs are especially tricky for historians to assess. Strip away the ephemera and the self-promotion and take into account the slippery trail of memory (as C. Vann Woodward, who gave us one of the few good examples of historical memoir in his book *Looking Back*, once wrote, “the twilight zone that lies between living memory and written history is one of the favorite breeding places of mythology”[1]) and what do you have? Often you are left with twice-told tales or anecdotes of dubious significance and minimal use. It is true that good memoirs tell us something about ourselves. The problem is that most memoirs are not that good, and they tend to tell us far too much about someone else.

That said, there are memoirs worth reading. The slim volume under review, South African writer Rrekgetsi Chimeloane’s series of vignettes about growing up in Diepkloof’s Zone Four in Soweto, manages to evoke an innocence amidst the privation and difficulties of apartheid South Africa in the 1970s. Each chapter seemingly covers a discrete topic and yet manages to speak about larger issues related to his boyhood amongst his

devoted family, school chums, and the ubiquitous bullies who pose a threat to his physical well being, his small amounts of spending and lunch money, and the occasional sweets he manages to obtain. Chimeloane manages to evoke both the innocence of a childhood that, in its broad contours, could describe a boyhood anywhere as well as to place his stories in a particular context—South Africa in the 1970s. Most of the book takes place prior to the June, 1976 Soweto Uprisings, an event that serves to provide metaphorical and literal passage from childhood to adolescence. Many South Africans came of age and developed political consciousness in Soweto. Chimeloane and his school friends, his “chomis,” were members of a generation that would prove to change the course of history. This makes the juxtaposition of the seeming banalities of growing up in Diepkloof all the more poignant.

Chimeloane looks back on his childhood by focusing on particular themes. The book begins with a never-fully-explained scene in which the young Chimeloane has apparently committed some sexual exploration with a neighboring girl. The remainder of the chapter is de-

voted to the young boy's attempts to cover up his transgression and to overcompensate through sparkling behavior. Thus the initial scene that he establishes quickly expands in order to tell a great deal more about his life and his surroundings.

Other chapters explore Rrekgetsi's irrational fear of dogs and the territorial boundaries that meant the difference between safe passage to and from his chosen destinations and potential disaster; going to the movies, or "seeing bioscope," and the importance that martial arts films held for young boys. A chapter about "sweets, snacks and lunch money" manages both to reveal the priorities of most young boys anywhere irrespective of geographic boundaries while at the same time providing a glimpse into the tight economic circumstances apartheid's victims experienced on a daily basis. There are chapters on his school, Ikaneng Lower Primary School, an obvious focal point of his life; on his friends, especially Levi, his best friend who was a few years younger than he; and on "work and play." Particularly insightful is the chapter "Thieves, Thugs and Rascals" in which we discover why most young people in Soweto and presumably across South Africa admired criminals and ruffians far more than they did the police and military who were a constant and distressing presence in the townships. When his father passes away, Rrekgetsi does not display much emotion, and in fact he does not see what the big deal is. For all of the closeness of his family, Chimeloane's father was never an affectionate presence for him. In a subsequent chapter Rrekgetsi explains how he similarly shuts off from school outings after an incident in which he was denied the opportunity to accompany his classmates when they went on a field trip. In a chapter entitled "eating around" we get further glimpses into how South Africans dealt with poverty and the pride and shame that could accompany deprivation. The penultimate chapter, one of the longest in the book, describes his experiences during the Soweto Uprisings, a time that provided tremendous excitement for him and his classmates while at the same time introducing an unanticipated level of chaos into his life. Not surprisingly, after Soweto, Chimeloane says "Goodbye to Boyhood" in the final chapter.

When social historians try to place people in the context of the political events surrounding them they look for the exact sorts of clues that Chimeloane provides in his slight but pleasurable read. Of course this book is just a small piece of the puzzle. While one young boy's experiences during a tumultuous period in South African history is fascinating and insightful, it does not necessarily speak for the whole. In that sense this might be a better book for general readers interested in South Africa, for undergraduate students who need insight into a particular time and place, and for specialists who simply want to add another layer of understanding to their own work. Historiographically and as evidence, the book may not leave much of a mark, but then that may not matter all that much. Sometimes a fascinating book that provides a good read and expands one's understanding can be enough.

Whose Laetie Are You? is not without its flaws. Sometimes the writing is a little on the choppy side. It certainly could have used better editing. The book contains a word list, but there is a certain level of capriciousness as to which words are included and which are not. For those unfamiliar with Setswana, Chimeloane's native language, a more comprehensive glossary would have been welcome. And finally, many of the pictures contained in the book are grainy, out of focus, and do not add a whole lot to Chimeloane's prose. These reservations aside, however, the prevailing sentiment I felt when I finished this book was that it was too brief. Weighing in at only 126 pages of actual text I yearned for more. In an era of self-indulgent memoirs and multi-volume reflections of lives part-lived, Chimeloane's endearing book is a welcome addition.

Although Kwela Books is a South African publisher, it has established a relationship with the Independent Publisher's Group of Chicago, which will distribute the book in the United States. That should help make this book both accessible and relatively inexpensive.

Notes

[1]. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), preface to the First Edition, p. xvi.

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Citation: Derek Catsam. Review of Chimeloane, Rrekgetsi, *Whose Laetie Are You? My Sowetan Boyhood*. H-SAfrica,

H-Net Reviews. June, 2002.

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