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11/13/01
Book Report

Bibliography:

Mathabane, Mark. Kaffir Boy. New York: Macmillan, 1986. Non-fiction, 354 pp.

Contents:

A. It is hard to believe that as late as the 1980's, Blacks were being brutally oppressed. The book Kaffir Boy takes place in Alexandra, South Africa, in the 1960's and 1970's. At the time, South Africa separated Blacks and Whites in what was called apartheid. Blacks lived in cramped, unsanitary, and impoverished conditions. Many black families were lucky to be able to rent a shack and buy just a little food and clothing. Worse than this were "tribal" reserves, where different ethnic groups of blacks lives, such as the Venda and Tsongas. Meanwhile, most Whites lived in wealthy, suburban homes and had one of the highest standards of living anywhere in the world.

Whites often claimed that they knew what was best for Blacks. They argued that apartheid gave Blacks a better life, but this was far from true. Blacks dealt with disease, hunger, a police force that enforced apartheid called the Peri-Urban, gangs, prostitution, a feeling of anger and hopelessness, and various other troubles. At the time, Blacks did not have the right to vote that Whites had and were subjected to countless laws, over which they had no say. These laws regulated many aspects of life for Blacks, including where blacks could live, work, have a family, and be buried. The laws also separated families, moved communities from their native lands, and caused oppression. Despite many protests, both by Blacks in the country and other nations around the world (such as when some other nations did not participate in South African

tennis tournaments), change was slow, as many of the Whites did not want to share their power with the “kaffirs” (infidels).

B. Mark Mathabane lives with his mother, father, younger sister, Florah, and younger brother, George. The ghettos in which they live are frequently raided by the Peri-Urban, who use sjamboks (whips) and sticks while attacking. They would aggressively and belligerently raid the area about once a week at unforeseen times. They would check the passes (papers of information about the people, received at the age of sixteen) of the Blacks in the area and arrest those without the passes “in order”, meaning that the passes weren’t kept up or showed that the Blacks were in some way breaking the law.

Father becomes unemployed and is heading to get a permit for a job when he is arrested for not having a job. He is gone for nearly a year, and the family has no source of income, therefore, very little to eat. Mark will resort to almost anything for food, including begging or stealing. Mark’s maternal grandmother is able to provide the family with a little money and a garbage dump that opened nearby is able to provide some food as well. After father’s return, the family is able to eat a bit more, but is by no means well fed.

After moving to another part of Alexandra, Mother enrolled Mark in the Bovet Community School. The school has very little money and a high dropout rate. Mark often receives whips with canes for not having the proper materials or uniform, because his family is so short on money. Even so, Mark comes out at the top of his class. Mother believes that education is needed for more opportunity, but Father thinks it is a waste of time and money, and is the White man’s way of keeping Blacks down, because he thinks they don’t learn anything important. After learning to read in school, Mark fostered a love of reading, and he would read anything he could.

Mark began receiving comic books and games from a white woman, Mrs. Smith, who Mark's grandmother did gardening for. Because he had been raised with the attitude that all Whites were cruel, Mark could not comprehend why a white woman would give him gifts. When he visited the Smith's house, he discovered that some Whites could be benevolent. Mrs. Smith treated Mark well, although her son, Clyde, disliked Mark. In school, Clyde had been taught that Blacks are naturally stupid and inferior.

After several years in school, Mark begins to play tennis and finds a coach, Scaramouche. Mark became captain of his school team and spends much of his time practicing. His father objected to tennis, calling it a "sissy sport". After meeting a tennis player named Tom, Mark joins a tennis ranch run by a German liberal, Wilfred Horn. Although the others at the ranch were white, they still respected Mark, providing more evidence that not all whites were malicious. Arthur Ashe, a black American tennis player who condemned apartheid, soon became Mark's hero. After much hard work, Mark began to compete in and win more professional championships, such as the Alexandra Open.

In 1976, the Department of Bantu Education mandated that all schools had to teach courses in Afrikaans, the language of the Whites of South Africa, instead of English, which most students thought was easier. Black students felt this was the last straw after many previous laws affecting and regulating the education of Blacks. The action sparked a nonviolent protest of ten thousand students in Soweto, South Africa on June 16, 1976. They marched through the streets until they encountered a line of police, who began firing at the students and killed many children. The news of this prompted many more demonstrations, including one at Mark's school. The police used guns and tear gas to try to control the protesters. The violence created large riots, which lasted for several weeks. The White areas were protected with increased security while

fighting, destruction, burning and looting of buildings, and carnage existed throughout the ghettos. After the rioting subsided, Mark returned to the tennis ranch, where the Whites insisted that Mark explain the truth about what had occurred, as the media had censored and suppressed most of the facts. It claimed that the violence had been provoked by “a ‘terroristic’ Communist movement out of touch with the aspirations of blacks” that had attempted to disrupt the “Christian, civilized, peace-loving, multinational democracy...” (pp. 273).

Mark had heard about the freedom and equality in America and hoped more than anything that he could get a tennis scholarship to an American college. While playing in the South African Breweries (SAB) Open, Mark gained valuable experience, despite losing the match. Soon afterwards, Mark met Stan Smith, an American Wimbledon champion and became good friends with him. Mark asked Stan to try to find an American college that would accept Mark. At the age of eighteen, Mark was finally employed. He worked at Barclay’s Bank and earned a salary which was three times the combined income of his mother and father. Even with this well-paying job, Mark still dreamed of traveling to America. After a long wait, he received several letters from various universities, including Princeton, awaiting his reply. He responded to a few and decided to go to Limestone College in Gaffney, South Carolina. After obtaining a passport and saying goodbye, Mark set out on his way to the “Promised Land” (pp. 292).

C. Apartheid, one of the core subjects of the book, had very apparent and pernicious effects on the Blacks of South Africa. The most conspicuous of the effects was the abject poverty in which the majority of the black people in the country were forced to live. While most Whites enjoyed wealth and opulence, most Blacks could barely survive with the paltry wages paid to them for their long, hard work, often mining gold. Most of the Blacks were uneducated and many wasted their precious income on alcohol and gambling. Rent for the dilapidated buildings

and shacks in which Blacks lived further drained the money needed for food, clothing, and health clinic visits.

The lack of money for food caused some to steal or eat from garbage dumps, just to stay alive. Hunger can cause atrocious effects, including lethargy, coughing, sores, hair color changes, fainting spells, vomiting the food that is eaten, decreased defense by the body against diseases such as chickenpox. Even the excretion of live worms from bloody stools is possible, as Mark saw happen to Florah and George. Apart from physical pain, hunger brings mental pain, such as hatred, anxiety, and hopelessness.

The poverty in which Blacks lived also caused ghettos to be unsanitary. With excrement all over, few baths, few health clinic visits, hunger, stress, little sleep, and cramped living areas, diseases like tuberculosis were bound to spread rapidly. Animals such as red ants, scorpions, bed bugs, and lice were ubiquitous, and it was not uncommon to find a rat chewing on one's hands or feet during the night.

Apartheid also instilled a constant feeling of apprehension and trepidation in Blacks, resulting from raids by the Peri-Urban. These raids occurred without warning, forcing Blacks to always be alert and vigilant. During the raids, passes were checked, and those with passes that weren't in order were often forced to hide until the Peri-Urban left. If caught, these Blacks were treated harshly and arrested. They were walked through the streets, often naked, and the family of the victim was not informed of when the arrested person would return. The anxiety caused by the raids was often exacerbated by extreme poverty. Many families had some money with which to bribe the Peri-Urban officers, but those who were completely broke had no alternative other than being arrested.

Apartheid also created a large, confusing bureaucracy, often with complex and arbitrary rules, which Blacks had to deal with. The workers at various offices were not lenient and often demanded every paper or form that was required, such as a birth certificate. Since most Blacks were illiterate, they often had to return to the office several times, hoping they had the correct papers. The bureaucrats also made important decisions based solely on their mood and what they felt like doing. For example, a poor black man had to visit a superintendent's office for violating the Influx Control Law, which separated many black workers from their families. The man would have gotten into deep trouble if Mark had not accompanied him. Mark spoke to the superintendent in Afrikaans, and since the superintendent loved Afrikaans, he simply let the man go, without any real reason. There are also several procedures to be followed that make it nearly impossible to get things done. When Mark's mother attempted to get him a birth certificate so he could attend school, the health clinic that she went to instructed her to go to another office first. After waiting in line for several hours before that office opened, the white man who worked there arbitrarily decided to go home early, and she was not able to see him. The second time she went to the office, the man was able to see her, but he insisted she needed papers from the clinic first. She beseeched him to give her a note to show the clinic that would explain the problem. He gave her a note (which she couldn't read, as she was illiterate), but it merely stated that she had a problem. Back at the clinic, the note was worthless. The only way Mark's mother was ever able to get Mark's birth certificate was by telling a sympathetic white nurse about the difficulty.

Apartheid brought much violence to the ghettos, much of which was caused by poverty and oppression. Apart from the police raids, riots occasionally sparked up, such as after the 1976 protest in Soweto. Many gangs were present all over the city. They primarily stole food and

belongings, but occasionally caused violence. One night, Mark saw tsotsis (thuggers and gangsters) sadistically and cruelly stab a black man so that he bled to death. They took his belongings and left. Mark later asked his mother why the police did not pay much attention to murders. His mother replied that policemen don't care if Blacks kill other Blacks. South African ghettos had one of the highest murder rates in the world, as well as a very large number of people in prisons.

Most Blacks in South Africa had a prejudicial hatred of Whites because of apartheid. The oppression that Blacks felt created an initial hatred, and because Blacks and Whites rarely mixed, most Blacks did not meet kind whites. Usually those Whites in the ghettos were with the Peri-Urban or worked in bureaucratic offices, so the prejudices of Blacks that all Whites were bad was not proven wrong. Mark, himself, believed this prejudice until he met Mrs. Smith. Once he began playing tennis at the ranch, most other Blacks hated him for it and called him "Uncle Tom" (a Black who associates with Whites). He received several threats, which caused him to worry a bit. One night, a group of Blacks went so far as to try to murder Mark on his way home from tennis; he barely escaped with his life.

D. I would recommend reading this book for a variety of reasons. It informs the reader about apartheid and its effects, especially poverty and hunger. It details the white supremacy and the enmity present between Blacks and Whites at the time. The book shows how different people interact and how decisions can greatly affect one's life (such as deciding to go to school). Most of all, the book documents injustice and motivates the reader to help put an end to such injustices all over the world.

Most people would probably appreciate the book, but it probably appeals most to adults and a few teens who are interested in apartheid and want to learn about injustice. Those

interested in political science would enjoy the book because it explains much about South Africa's political system, the power of whites, and how laws affect the people of a country. People concerned about racism and discrimination would also like the book, as it details how most Whites and Blacks had prejudiced, stereotypical beliefs about each other and how these feelings came about (possibly because of education in white schools or the parents of Whites or Blacks prejudicing their children). Those interested in history would also find the book appealing because apartheid was a major part of South Africa's history and the book cites many historical events, such as the 1976 protests and riots and the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

A person would like this book because it is informative, yet not dull and tedious. It is written in a captivating way and leaves the reader with a memorable and influential feeling. Those who prefer non-fiction should like this biography because it falls into that category. However, those who prefer fiction should also find it enjoyable because it has dialogue and a captivating story, making it seem like, at times, a fiction book. The book opened my mind and gave me another view with which to look at the world.