

Kaffir Boy: The True Story Of A Black Youth's Coming Of Age In Apartheid South Africa

Literary Themes for Students: Race and Prejudice
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Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid [South Africa](#)

MARK MATHABANE

1986

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INTRODUCTION

In *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid [South Africa](#)*, Mark Mathabane presents the remarkable story of his childhood and his rise to prominence as a journalist, lecturer, and humanitarian. Mathabane grew up in the terrifying shantytowns of Alexandra, outside of Johannesburg, South Africa. In these urban slums, he witnessed and survived the most repressive period of apartheid, [the South African](#) government's system of legalized racism. On a page of explanation before the narrative begins, Mathabane tells the reader, "In South Africa [the word *Kaffir*] is used disparagingly by most whites to refer to blacks. It is the equivalent of the term *nigger*. I was called a 'Kaffir' many times."

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Kaffir Boy tells the story of his life under apartheid, as well as how he escaped South Africa to attend an American university, leaving his family behind. Mathabane's unwavering honesty is the book's main strength. One section, "The Road to Alexandra," offers a particularly relentless depiction of brutality and squalor. From the first page, Mathabane shows his readers the devastating personal costs of institutionalized racism: destroyed families, demolished personal pride, psychological pain, and ceaseless physical suffering. Mathabane does not lecture the reader; instead, the details of his story show what happens when racist brutality is made law. Mathabane does not shrink from relating his own failures, which include hanging out in gangs, battling with his father, and feeling hatred for all white people. Mathabane dwells on his own attitudes in the second half of the book, demonstrating how he overcomes his hatred for whites and learns to judge people as individuals.

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When *Kaffir Boy* was published in 1986, apartheid was still an official government policy in South Africa. Most educated people and governments in the rest of the world knew about apartheid in a vague sense, but few knew the full extent of [the South](#) African government's stance. Mathabane's autobiography thus became an important historical document. Mathabane describes significant events in the history of apartheid that were poorly

covered by the Western press, such as the Sharpeville Massacre and the Soweto riots. *Kaffir Boy* is an important political work, as well. As Mathabane explains in the preface, his goal in writing the book was to help abolish apartheid. Now that apartheid has ended, the book still serves to demonstrate the horrifying consequences of institutionalized injustice and inequity. Like [Frederick Douglass's](#) autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, and [Richard Wright's](#) *Black Boy*, *Kaffir Boy* makes real for readers events that are often lost in the abstraction of law and [social policy](#).

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Mathabane's autobiography became an international bestseller and was translated into several languages. He won a Christopher Award for his book, an honor presented to writers and others whose work reveals something about the human condition. Since its publication, *Kaffir Boy* has become a familiar part of high school and college curricula. Mathabane continues to write about South Africa, as well as his more recent experiences. *Kaffir Boy in America: An Encounter with Apartheid* (1990) is a sequel to *Kaffir Boy*, in which Mathabane describes his life after coming to America and his struggles with American society. His other books include *Love in Black and White* (1992), co-written by Mathabane's white American wife, Gail, about their experiences as an interracial couple; *African Women* (1994), a non-fiction account of his mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother's experiences; *Ubuntu* (1999), a fictional thriller set in South Africa; and *Miriam's Song* (2000), the story of Mark's younger sister Miriam's coming of age amid the violence of apartheid resistance.

PLOT SUMMARY

Part I: The Road to Alexandra Chapters 1-20

Mark Mathabane, born Johannes Mathabane, begins by describing Alexandra, one of the many black shantytowns (sometimes called townships) created under apartheid. Alexandra is where Mathabane grew up and where most of the book's events take place. He writes that apartheid laws allow "more than 90 percent of white South Africans go through a lifetime without seeing firsthand the inhuman conditions under which blacks have to survive." He defines his purpose as showing the white man "with words a world he would otherwise not see because of a sign and a conscience racked with guilt."

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Chapter 2 plunges the reader into these conditions, as they occur in Alexandra. One night in 1965, the black Alexandra police, known as Peri-Urban, raid the township. They arrest as many residents as they can, for reasons ranging from not having a pass (an internal passport) to participating in a gang. Johannes's mother must flee because her pass does not have correct documentation; she leaves the children alone in their house. Johannes and his sister Florah watch the chaos through a window until their baby brother George gashes his head in a fall. In another raid, Johannes sees black policemen humiliate his father. Though common in Alexandra, these raids strengthen Johannes's deep fear of and hatred toward black police officers and whites in general.

Johannes's father, Jackson, belongs to the Venda tribe, and the family speaks a language called Venda. As Johannes grows up, he begins to question and resent many aspects of his life, including his father's respect for tribal rules.

Johannes talks during a meal, setting off the first of many father-son conflicts over tribal ways. His father is short-tempered and abusive, habits that only intensify in later years. On the other hand, Johannes's mother is a considerate and strong-willed woman.

Late in 1966, Johannes's father is arrested and imprisoned because his passbook is not in order. Without his support for almost a year, the family struggles to feed themselves. Johannes's sister Maria is born during this time, making the food scarcity even worse. His mother spends much of her time looking for work or begging for money and food. Johannes's maternal grandmother contributes some money, but it is not enough and runs out quickly. At one point, the Mathabanes and other black families rummage through a garbage dump, searching for food and household items discarded by whites. Johannes's mother discovers a dead black baby in a box left at the dump.

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Jackson returns from prison a bitter man, prone to drinking and gambling. He manages to get his old job back, but he squanders his money and the family still goes hungry. Johannes spends his time with gangs of young boys to avoid troubles at home. He sees his first film with the gangs; it terrifies him because no one tells him that the images do not depict someone else's real life: "To me the illusions and fantasy of the movies were the stark reality of a world I was forbidden to enter."

BIOGRAPHY

MARK MATHABANE

Mark Mathabane was born Johannes Mathabane in 1960, the first of seven children, to a Tsonga mother and a Venda father. He grew up in the black ghetto shantytown of Alexandra, outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, under the oppressive government system known as apartheid. When Mathabane was seven years old, his mother and grandmother collected enough money to send him to a local school. At the age of fourteen, he learned to play tennis, eventually becoming good enough to gain the attention of star American tennis player Stan Smith, who arranged for Mathabane to receive a scholarship to an American university. In 1983, he graduated *cum laude* from Dowling University, where he was the first black editor of the college newspaper. He then went on to study journalism at [Columbia University](#). At the same time, he began publishing essays about South Africa and apartheid. In 1986, he published his first autobiography, *Kaffir Boy*, which won widespread recognition in the [United States](#) and [Great Britain](#).

As of 2006, he continues to write and lecture about racism and South Africa. Additionally, he has established a scholarship fund to provide books and uniforms for school children of the Bovet Primary School in Alexandra, where he and his siblings studied.

In 1967, Johannes has his first encounter with Christianity. His father hates Christianity; for him it is a white belief system used to oppress black men. Johannes's mother, however, is curious about Christianity, having noticed that Christian black families tend to fare better than those that cling to tribal ways. His father takes the family to an evangelical service to show them that Christianity is foolish. At the service, the sermon mirrors the white Christian view of South Africa: black people are especially cursed as the "sons of Ham" and so must work harder to redeem themselves. Several of the black men in

the audience, including Johannes's father, denounce the minister and leave. The scene establishes a persistent conflict between Johannes's parents. His father insists on devotion to the tribal religion and continuously denounces Christianity, while his mother secretly, and later openly, accepts Christianity as a way to improve her family's circumstances.

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Later that year, Johannes has one of the most frightening experiences of his life. Wandering the streets as he often does, he comes across a group of boys waiting in front of a barracks. The boys promise him all the food he can eat. When Johannes and the other boys enter the compound, black men greet them and offer food. Johannes notices beds in the back of the room and begins to feel uncomfortable. He refuses to eat and watches as the others strip and line up near the bed. Johannes panics when he realizes the men intend to have sex with the boys and runs away. The boys call Johannes a fool for not participating, but Johannes realizes that in "the black world, one could only survive if one played the fool, and bided his time." He vows to keep his experience a secret but later discovers that such occurrences are common. Mathabane writes that most of the boys involved later end up dead or in prison.

Johannes's trip to the Venda tribal reserve with his father is a defining moment in his intellectual development. Johannes's father has lost his job; worrying that witches have cursed him, he seeks help from a tribal [witch doctor](#). The reserve is "mountainous, rugged and bonedry," and the people there lead empty, impoverished lives. Johannes is particularly struck by the fact that there

are nearly no men there; they must go to the cities to work in mines. He decides he would rather die than live on the reserve.

Part I ends when Johannes's mother tries to obtain the documents he needs to attend school. This turns out to be a long and humiliating process, one that begins at four in the morning when she walks the younger children to their grandmother's house. She then takes Johannes to the appropriate office, where they stand in line for over twelve hours. Her first attempt fails because her brother, Piet, gets arrested; she has to use the money she had planned to use for Johannes to secure Piet's release. On her second attempt, the white officer who issues the paperwork decides to take the afternoon off. Her third attempt is thwarted when bureaucrats demand Johannes's birth certificate. A black officer refuses to issue the birth certificate, but a white nurse intervenes. After his mother gets the necessary papers, she tells Johannes that not all white people are bad, but he does not believe her.

Part II: Passport to Knowledge Chapters 21-34

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Johannes's mother and grandmother collect enough money to send him to school, but Johannes refuses to go because he has heard horror stories about it from other boys. His mother and grandmother have to tie him up and take him to see the principal, who makes it clear that Johannes will be physically punished if he does not go to school. Johannes remains opposed until his drunken father kicks the family out of the house, furious about his children going to school. He believes tribal education is the only kind that matters—

school is just another white man's trick. Johannes's mother explains to Johannes that she is sending him to school because she does not "want [him] growing up to be like [his] father," which shatters Johannes's resistance.

Still, the reality of school is a harsh one. Children crowd into an outside square to listen to long speeches from the principal and the teachers; they are then taken to overcrowded classrooms. Johannes's teacher is an inexperienced young woman who cannot control her pupils. Frustrated, she goes into a violent frenzy, whipping the children indiscriminately and making Johannes increasingly skeptical about school. He is unable to afford books or a uniform, and his teachers whip him frequently. Nevertheless, he manages to finish the first year at the top of his class. Johannes's success softens his father's prejudice against formal education.

The following school year, Johannes's teachers beat him again for not having proper school supplies. He confronts his mother about his desire to drop out, but she urges him to continue. As soon as she finds a job, she says, she is going to spend her first paycheck on schoolbooks for him. She is six months pregnant, but his mother takes a job cleaning for a large Indian family. Her income helps with Johannes's school expenses, even though his father now often refuses to give her money for groceries. Johannes continues to excel in school, but he still cannot grasp the value of education. He has no experience with educated black role models, so he has never seen the tangible benefits of education.

Two American events make their way to black South Africa. The first is Muhammad Ali's championship fight, in which he knocks out a white man and thus becomes a hero to underprivileged blacks. "Ali fever" sweeps the men and boys in Alexandra. Many of the boys misunderstand what *knockout* means, and Johannes dreams of someday becoming a boxer so that he can beat white men to death and do even worse to black policemen who victimize other blacks. One evening, Johannes and a group of neighborhood boys go to a boxing club, where the owner puts Johannes into the ring with an experienced fighter and has Johannes "play" Ali. Johannes gets beaten senseless and shuns boxing afterward. The other notable American event is the assassination of [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), known only as "King" to the black South Africans. This event introduces Johannes to the concept of equal rights.

One evening after ditching school, Johannes witnesses a murder. A group of *tsotsis*, teenage gang members, hunt a man down and kill him for his meager possessions. Though Johannes has seen dead black people before, he is profoundly affected by witnessing this incident. He cannot understand why people kill each other, and he can make even less sense of a black person killing another black person. He longs to escape to some place of "love and compassion" but has no idea where such a place would be. He broods over these thoughts for days. A few months later, his despair remains so great that he considers suicide. His mother eventually convinces him that his siblings need him and that she would not want to live without him.

Johannes's grandmother gets a gardening job with the Smiths, a white family. The Smiths are English, not Afrikaner (white South Africans descended from Dutch immigrants). They are vaguely opposed to apartheid and supply Johannes's grandmother with comic books and clothes for Johannes.

Johannes begins to learn English from the comic books. This connection to the Smiths will affect Johannes's life significantly.

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Johannes's father decides to run a beer club, known as a *stockvel*, to earn money. He promises to give up gambling and stop spending money on alcohol; he even hands over an entire week's wages as proof of his good intentions. From these *stockvel* parties, Johannes learns to keep accounts, a job that falls to him because of his knowledge of math. When illiterate customers see that Johannes is trustworthy, they begin to bring their letters to him. They cannot read or respond to the letters their far-away family members send, but in their letters Johannes learns about the terrible hardships many people on the black reserves face. In many of them, Johannes sees the "death of the mind and soul," which he believes is worse than physical death.

Johannes gets his first real glimpse of the white world when he accompanies his grandmother to work at the Smiths. He is startled to find that a large house and many cars can belong to just one family in the white world. Mrs. Smith is pleasant, but she is patronizing to Johannes. The Smiths' son, Clyde, is one year older than Johannes and goes to a Boer school. ("Boer" is another term for Afrikaner; it refers specifically to Afrikaners who were farmers.) Clyde learns the ways and attitudes of apartheid at school, though his mother tries to dissuade him from those views. He treats Johannes as an idiot, while showing off his books and toys. Clyde claims to have learned that black people are incapable of civilization because they have smaller brains than whites. His remark infuriates Johannes, who resolves to prove that he can be the

intellectual superior of any white man. Mrs. Smith gives Johannes a copy of *Treasure Island*, which he uses to begin studying English in earnest.

Johannes realizes the pointlessness of gang life when he is coerced into participating in a gang battle in which a boy loses his eye. He renounces the gangs, preferring constant studying.

At home, Johannes continues to fight with his father. When his father has no money for bus fare because he has gambled it away, Johannes refuses to give him some. Johannes sees their struggle as a conflict between worldviews. His father is unable to see any hope in the future and lives for past days of tribal glories. Johannes, however, looks for ways to escape the terror of shantytown existence and make his life better: "The thick veil of tribalism which so covered his eyes and mind and heart was absolutely of no use to me." Part II ends when Mrs. Smith gives Johannes a tennis racket. Johannes practices tennis on the Alexandra sand court, watched by a "coloured" man—"his official designation as one of over two million people of mixed race who ... were neither black nor white." The man's name is Scaramouche; known as one of the best tennis players in the area, he becomes Johannes's coach.

Part III: Passport to Freedom Chapters 35-53

Scaramouche gives Johannes tennis books and magazines. Johannes learns about famous black and colored tennis players, including Arthur Ashe, [Althea Gibson](#), and Evonne Goolagong. Johannes's father, however, considers tennis a "sissy sport" and tries to shame Johannes out of playing it.

Johannes dislikes and distrusts his father's tribal beliefs; he feels similarly about his mother's Christianity, though he never argues with her about it openly. He does, however, argue with a pair of evangelists. Johannes calls

them liars for making people forget reality and dwell on a fantasy life in Heaven; he says they are cheats for taking money away from poor people. He says they have betrayed their own people by shaping their lives according to a book of white stories.

Johannes has a major altercation with his father when he appears with two men to take Johannes to "mountain school." This is a Venda manhood ritual, involving circumcision. Brandishing a knife, Johannes refuses to go and threatens to kill anyone who tries to make him. After this incident, he goes to live with his grandmother for two weeks. When he returns, he and his father hardly speak.

Johannes's academic success pays off when he wins a scholarship that pays for three years of [secondary school](#). His loathing for the tribal traditions leads him to choose Alexandra Secondary School rather than the boarding school on the Tsonga reserve. This proves a fateful decision, because the Alexandra school has a tennis team. Johannes begins devoting most of his spare time to tennis. He takes up yoga, reads tennis instruction magazines and books, and vows to postpone sex. His regimen pays off; he wins often, becomes captain of the team, and enters several black tennis tournaments. In 1973, he meets a tennis player named Tom who plans to quit his job at a tennis club run by liberal whites. Johannes immediately suggests that he replace Tom. When he meets the German who runs the club, Johannes "for some reason" gives his name as "Mark." He is known as Mark from that day on.

The South African government allows black American tennis star Arthur Ashe to play a tournament in South Africa late in 1973. Ashe is a hero to politically conscious South Africans because of his public denunciations of apartheid. Whenever he can, Mark goes to watch Ashe play: "[He] had never seen a

black man walk that proudly among whites." Ashe's wins are major news in black South Africa. Because of Ashe's success, Mark begins to believe that the only chance he has to excel is to leave South Africa and live in America. Before leaving South Africa, Ashe helps establish the Black Tennis Foundation to train aspiring black athletes.

Mark continues winning tennis tournaments and excelling in school. At the tennis club, he is able to develop the "unheard of" habit of talking to whites as equals. He feels that this is his "true self" and finds it increasingly difficult to pretend inferiority around whites. At a black tennis tournament in Pretoria, Mark realizes that working at the white tennis club has given him tremendous advantages. If he had stuck to black training facilities, Mathabane believes he would not have had any chance at escaping poverty.

Mark begins to have eye problems after the tournament, eventually losing most of his sight. He gets no attention at overcrowded clinics and hospitals, so he agrees to follow his mother's advice and see a [witch doctor](#). The witch doctor says that devils are pursuing Mark, reaching him through his work reading and writing letters for strangers. She tells him that to get better, he must be a "son of Africa." He follows the witch doctor's prescriptions, and he stops reading and writing letters for illiterate people. He eventually sees a specialist, who gives him eye drops. The problem goes away, but Mark is never certain which prescription provided the cure. His ambivalence indicates his divided cultural identity.

During his third year at [secondary school](#), Mark has a conversation with his principal, who worries that Mark reads too many "white" books. Mark reveals that "white" books have shown him that he can never have real freedom in South Africa. The principal tells Mark that the older generation of black South

Africans misunderstood the political situation, believing too strongly that they could reason with white society. He tells Mark to cultivate his rebellious spirit but to be careful because he risks turning blacks against him, too.

In June of 1976, the South African government decrees that blacks must be educated in Afrikaans, not English. Many black students view Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor and refuse to speak it. On June 16, ten thousand students march down the streets of Soweto Township in protest, only to run into a police barricade. Police officers fire on the unarmed protesters, killing several children. This incident sparks intense anger in the black community, and Mark decides to join a protest with his fellow students. The police respond with overwhelming force, killing more protesters. Rioting and looting break out; whites flee the country, fearing a black revolution. After the police kill a girl who lives near Mark, he fears that there will never be a peaceful resolution to apartheid.

Police officers begin raiding students' schools and homes, arresting hundreds. Mark decides that home and school are not safe and begins to spend most of his time at the tennis club. There he meets Helmut, a German opposed to apartheid. They play tennis in whites-only facilities, openly flouting the law. From Helmut, Mark learns about Germany's Nazi past and the Holocaust. Helmut takes foolish risks, such as dropping Mark off at home. Many in Alexandra suspect that Mark is an informant. Some gang members attack Mark, and he is lucky to escape them.

Mark meets and befriends Andre Zietsman, a rising young white South African tennis star. He tells Mark about blacks and whites living and working together in America. Andre describes the shock he felt when no American called him *bass* (Afrikaans for "boss" or "master"); blacks and whites played on the

same sports teams, ate in the same restaurants, mixed freely at social gatherings, and slept in the same dormitories. These descriptions make Mark even more eager to experience life in America.

Mark makes two important decisions about his future during his final year of secondary school. He turns down a job with the company sponsoring his scholarship. Though the job would make him middle class, Mark wants freedom more than money. Mark also decides to play in his first professional tournament. He loses his first match and ends up banned from the black tennis league. With time to spare, Mark watches a famous American doubles team practice. One of the team members, the legendary Stan Smith, asks Mark to practice with him. Afterward, over lunch with Smith and his wife, Mark tells them about his life and his desire for a scholarship to an American university. He becomes friends with the Smiths, and they provide funds that allow Mark to enter some tournaments. He does not play well in the tournaments, so he conducts some clinics in the [Cape Town](#) shanty areas.

Things seem to get worse for Mark. The government officially allows some blacks to join white tennis clubs, but Mark finds it an empty policy with the usual racist barriers still in place. Mark encounters similar racism in his academic life. The white-run exams administration deliberately downgrades many students' final exam results, including Mark's, making it impossible for them to be admitted to a South African university. Mark begins doing well in some South African tennis tournaments though, and joins South Africa's best junior tennis squad as its first black player. Mark eventually finds a job at a bank, where he makes more money than his parents ever did.

When Mark accepts a full scholarship to Limestone College in [South Carolina](#), he becomes "the first black boy to ever leave South Africa on a tennis

scholarship." He initially has trouble getting a passport, but liberal whites come to his aid once again, providing the money and influence necessary to get the required paperwork. After a tearful farewell with his family, including his father, he wonders, "Why does apartheid do this to us? ... Why had it created within my father's heart a granite wall?" However, he notes that the wall shatters in the face of this monumental departure. He leaves feeling that he has a duty to his race and his country to succeed personally and work toward the betterment of black life in South Africa.

THEMES

Identity

Mathabane's attempt to relate to different cultural identities is a recurring theme in *Kaffir Boy*. He is ambivalent about the various group identities that are open to him: tribal, Christian, South African, and black. He eventually accepts his racial heritage as his defining "culture" because it allows him to come to terms with the harshness of apartheid, but he never relinquishes his individuality. Mathabane argues that he had to reject some of these identities, especially his mother's Christianity and his father's tribal heritage.

Nonetheless, by the end of the book Mathabane recognizes that people cannot escape their culture or upbringing: "[D]eep within me I knew that I could never really leave South Africa or Alexandra. I was Alexandra, I was South Africa." Mathabane thus acknowledges that his parents' attitudes and values shape his own. Even though they do not define him, they are a part of South Africa that he takes with him to America.

Oppression

As Mathabane matures, he learns that both religion and culture can become tools of oppression. He sees how apartheid distorts tribal customs and traditional black identities, using them to dominate and dismiss black South Africans. Superstition plays a significant role in tribal traditions, and blacks who live on the reserves suffer under the "double yoke of apartheid and tribalism." Mathabane sees a similar problem when township men, like his father, bow to superstitious beliefs. He shares his mother's view that township blacks who cling to tribalism usually fare worse than those who become more modern.

Mathabane never accepts Christianity as an alternative to tribalism, pointing out that it, too, has worked to keep black people oppressed. South Africa's white government calls itself Christian while arguing that God gives whites the authority to rule over blacks. Black churches are not much better, claiming that blacks suffer a special burden of sin and thus must work especially hard for divine rewards—mainly by giving money to the churches. At one point, Johannes angrily denounces a pair of evangelists, calling them traitors. He and a friend burn pamphlets that the evangelists leave behind, an act that symbolizes their general disdain for the Christian message.

Eventually, Mathabane acknowledges that his mother benefited from her faith. However, he could never join her; he cannot accept that God favors whites while allowing injustices against black Africans to continue unabated. He rejects Christianity for the same basic reason he rejects tribal beliefs—he knows that neither system can provide the answers he needs about white power and black oppression.

The Power of Education

Kaffir Boy contends that education is the best route to a better life.

Mathabane's story establishes a relationship between knowledge and opportunity, and shows how possessing knowledge means having power. Learning English, in particular, is the "crucial key" that grants access to the white world. It seems to Mathabane that white people gain power over black people by reading books. He also repeatedly sees how illiteracy keeps blacks impoverished and comes to understand that literacy is essential to the struggle for black liberation. Mathabane finds that reading changes his views, allowing him to see both freedom and slavery for what they are. Moreover, books teach him about America and show that apartheid is not the only possible social system.

The relationship between education, opportunity, and political power becomes even clearer to Mathabane during the Soweto riots. These riots start with the government's ruling that black South Africans must be educated in Afrikaans instead of English, a decision that angers many black students. As Mathabane watches a public library burn, a friend explains that it was set on fire to destroy evidence of white oppression and Bantu Education (the segregated schooling that black South Africans received). Mathabane agrees that Bantu Education hurts black people, but he is still angry: "Why burn the only things that taught one to believe in the future, to fight for one's right to live in freedom and dignity?" He understands that schools and libraries offer what little hope there is for blacks and risks his life to rescue some books from the burning library. Later, he tells a group of white men that rioters burn libraries and schools because black protesters cannot burn their real targets, the homes and institutions of white people.

Mathabane thinks about quitting school several times, and the Soweto riots raise this question again. During the riots, he decides that the best way to help

destroy apartheid is to flee to another country and join a rebel force. Before he can act on this idea, a man with relatives among the Zimbabwean freedom fighters tells him that the gun is one of many tools for achieving freedom. He tells Mathabane that this struggle is not just a matter of force. Victory over apartheid will require thinkers and writers as well, people who can show the rest of the world what is happening. Eventually, Mathabane makes his contribution to the struggle by writing *Kaffir Boy*.

Throughout the book, Mathabane emphasizes that his academic success made special opportunities available to him. His education improves his potential earning power, allows him to negotiate the bureaucratic system more effectively, and connects him to people who can help further his ambitions. Though Mathabane questions the value of his education while he is in the midst of it, the existence of his book underscores its influence on his life.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Apartheid

Apartheid was a policy of social and political segregation that typified South Africa for much of its history.

The Union of South Africa was formed in 1910. Two British colonies, the Cape Colony and Natal Colony, combined with the South African Republic and Orange [Free State](#) (two states defeated in the Second [Boer War](#)). These states were thereafter known as the [Cape Province](#), Natal, Transvaal and the Orange [Free State](#), respectively. The Union's constitution contained provisions establishing that blacks were legally inferior to whites.

In 1948, the all-white Nationalist Party gained control of the South African government and immediately instituted the policy of apartheid as the official

law of South Africa. Most of the apartheid laws created during the 1950s became known as "petty apartheid." Under these laws, every citizen was classified by race; classification boards were established to decide difficult cases. These laws created many obstacles and hardships for non-white citizens. Mixed-race marriages were illegal, as was interracial sex. The Group Areas Act of 1950 aimed to separate various racial groups geographically. Blacks needed special permission to visit white areas, and they could not live there. In 1953, the Separate Amenities Act required separate public facilities for blacks, whites, and "coloureds" (a group that included non-European and non-African nationals, such as Indians and mixed-race South Africans). These "separate amenities" included hospitals, schools, and beaches. Blacks and "coloureds" had to carry a pass, or internal passport, to travel in and out of their designated reserves and townships. A person without a pass could be arrested on the spot. These identity papers had to be constantly updated, as well.

The government claimed that apartheid policies were simply sensible procedures for separating groups that could never get along. In reality, apartheid was the use of force to create total economic and political inequality along racial lines. After the anti-pass protests of 1960, the white South African government stepped up its apartheid policy, announcing "Grand Apartheid." Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd led the movement to create reservations for black tribes, calling them independent nations. Blacks thus became recognized as foreigners and were treated as such, though they outnumbered whites seven to one. Passes, labor permits, and Bantu Education policies often separated families, and many were kept in total poverty.

Other nations expressed their disapproval of apartheid with economic and political sanctions against South Africa. By the 1980s, international pressure

began to affect the South African economy and influence domestic attitudes toward apartheid. Black protests against apartheid became bolder and more frequent as pro-African parties realized that South Africa was under international scrutiny. The government gradually repealed many of the petty apartheid laws. By 1993, all of the apartheid laws were repealed, and President F. W. de Klerk called for a new constitution and a more democratically representative government. The [African National Congress](#) (ANC) took power in the 1994 elections, and Nelson Mandela, a black man who spent three decades in jail for opposing apartheid, was elected president.

The Sharpeville Massacre

On March 21, 1960, the Pan-Africanist Party (PAC) arranged a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, a shantytown, to protest laws requiring blacks to carry passes to travel in white areas of South Africa. White authorities responded by killing sixty-nine unarmed protesters and wounding more than one hundred eighty. Protests elsewhere were similarly suppressed, but less violently. The government declared a state of emergency; detention without trial was legalized and pro-African political parties were banned. South Africa was condemned by many of the world's governments for its handling of the Sharpeville protest.

The Soweto Riots

In 1974, the South African government issued the Afrikaans Medium Decree. This law required that all black students learn Afrikaans and that all tribal schools be taught largely in Afrikaans, rather than English. The law angered black South Africans, for a variety of reasons. Afrikaans, originally derived from Dutch, was commonly spoken by South African whites—most blacks

could not speak or write Afrikaans. Furthermore, most blacks viewed Afrikaans as the language of their oppressors; they preferred to learn their tribal languages and English. On June 16, 1976, thousands of black schoolchildren gathered to protest the new law in Soweto, a shantytown outside of Johannesburg. The students threw stones and white South African police responded, using real bullets—not plastic bullets, as expected—to disperse the crowd. By the time the protests were brought under control, more than five hundred blacks had been killed, most of them children. Widespread shock and fury among blacks led to uprisings in other townships. Thousands of young men and women fled to neighboring African nations, joining anti-apartheid movements among the exiled there. Media coverage of the violence was strictly limited, and most foreign journalists were denied access. Nevertheless, information and photographs escaped, sparking international sanctions and public condemnation of South Africa.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When *Kaffir Boy* was published, it was hailed as an important contribution to global understanding of apartheid. It peaked at number three on the [New York Times](#) Paperback Best Sellers List in the fall of 1987. *Publishers Weekly*, reviewing the book in February 1986, called it a "powerful account" that makes the reader "feel intensely the horrors of apartheid." In a review of Mathabane's follow-up memoir, *Kaffir Boy in America: An Encounter with Apartheid*, *Publishers Weekly* refers to the original as "one of the best books ever written about apartheid." In "After Apartheid, a New Struggle," the *Chicago Sun-Times* calls Mathabane's autobiography "searing," noting that his frank treatment of apartheid's horrors make it "almost painful reading."

Kaffir Boy won a Christopher Award for its service to humanity and was placed on the [American Library Association's](#) list of Outstanding Books for the College Bound. Positive reviews and Mathabane's appearance on an episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* led to *Kaffir Boy* appearing on many high school reading lists, as well. From time to time, however, there is controversy about whether *Kaffir Boy* is appropriate for young adult readers. Most of the controversy surrounds a small part of the book: the passage involving boys who prostitute themselves for food. Some parents and teachers see this passage as pornographic or as promoting homosexuality. Neither characterization is accurate, but this passage has sometimes resulted in the book being removed from curricula or being placed on restricted access in school libraries.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

An abridged version of *Kaffir Boy*, read by Howard Rollins, is available on cassette from New Millennium Books Audio.

Mark Mathabane maintains a website at www.mathabane.com with links to reviews, articles, photos, and excerpts from many of his books.

Mathabane objects to this reaction. In an article entitled "Like the Taliban, Some U.S. Parents Fear Free Minds," in *USA Today*, Mathabane admits that some parts of his autobiography are violent and unpleasant, but "books are not written with readers' comfort in mind. I wrote *Kaffir Boy* to show the world the inhumanity of apartheid and the consequences of dehumanizing others, and to educate people about racial hate." In his article "If You Assign My Book, Don't Censor It," published in the *Washington Post*, Mathabane argues against the practice of partial censoring, in which teachers cover or mark out parts of the book that they find objectionable. He asks that *Kaffir Boy* either be taught

as it was written to students of an appropriate age, or not taught at all. According to the "Attempts to Ban *Kaffir Boy*" page of Mathabane's website, Mathabane released an "international edition" of the book that omits the contentious scene to make his book more accessible to middle-school students. *Kaffir Boy* remains controversial. *Kaffir Boy* is ranked thirty-first on the [American Library Association's](#) list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000. South Africa initially banned the book, though that ban lasted only a couple of months.

CRITICISM

Jessica Powers

In the following essay Powers argues that although Mathabane sought to completely separate himself from South Africa, he has been unable to leave it behind and it has become his life's work.

The recurring question of *Kaffir Boy*—the autobiography of Mark Mathabane, a young black who grew up in Alexandra, a ghetto of South Africa—is one of identity: "What race, religion, country, and class do I/should I belong to?" To survive the reality of apartheid, to affirm his racial heritage and individual identity as an autonomous human being, Mathabane argues he had to reject his parents' religious and tribal heritage and leave South Africa.

Yet despite the fact that he strips away many of the most obvious elements of South African life, at the end of the book Mathabane claims he can never escape his culture or his country. "Deep within me," he states, "I knew that I could never really leave South Africa or Alexandra. I was Alexandra, I was South Africa." The question of whether this is true becomes more acute throughout the book as it becomes clearer how separate Mathabane keeps

himself from other black South Africans. Yet he resents any inference that he rejected African culture and allowed white culture to shape or define him. Rather, Mathabane firmly believes that every decision he makes—and the elements of black and white culture that he accepts or rejects—are self-determined exercises of autonomy.

One of the first observations Mathabane made as a young child was how apartheid had twisted tribalism and used it as a form of oppression against Africans. At seven years old, he realized that his father's life was "controlled" by superstition. Even at that young age, Mathabane's individual consciousness was highly developed, and he deliberately rejected the superstition of his parents, claiming his right to do so because "my life was my own to do with as I pleased." When he recognized his father's slavery to the "double yoke of apartheid and tribalism," he realized that African "superstition" and tribal culture were not for him. His scorn for his father lay in the fact that his father clung to values which had "outlived" their "usefulness," values which discriminated against him while he attempted to function within the white man's world.

Equally, Mathabane rejected Christianity, claiming it was misused by all sides. The government used it to claim that God had given whites the [divine right](#) to rule over blacks; the black churches misused it by demanding money from Africans who were already destitute; and black churches further misused it by resigning themselves to the idea that this was their "lot" in life, God's will for black men and women.

Although Mathabane came to accept his mother's faith, and recognized the legitimacy in her relationship with the Christian God, he stated that he could never share in her faith because he could never believe in a God who favored

whites and stood by, "oblivious" to Africans' pain. His rejection of Christianity, like his rejection of tribalism and African superstition, was based on an understanding that he could not give up his "free will" in order to submit to these cultural and religious institutions.

What Mathabane did accept, though it took some trial and error, was his mother's understanding that education would lead him to a better life. Learning English, he decided, was the "crucial key" to unlocking the doors of the white world. The books that white people read led to the "power" they had over black people. Mathabane eventually decided that literacy was a necessary element in the liberation struggle. How can the illiterate function, he wondered, in a world ruled by sign? Books had taught him about places where he could be "free to think and feel the way I want, instead of the way apartheid wants."

Mathabane's understanding became even more acute in the middle of the Soweto riots, which were sparked by anger over the government's ruling that African education be taught in Afrikaans instead of English. As he watched a library burn down, he asked for an explanation from one of his friends, who stated that they were burning the library down to destroy all traces of white oppression and Bantu Education. Mathabane's angry internal response was the question: "Why burn the only thing that taught one to believe in the future, to fight for one's right to live in freedom and dignity?"

Though Mathabane left South Africa, it is clear he took it with him. It has become his life's work. During the middle of the Soweto riots, despite his love of learning, he had wondered if he should quit school and become a guerilla fighter. An African who had relatives among the freedom fighters in Zimbabwe told him not to sacrifice everything for the gun. "There's room for people with your brains in the struggle," he said. "Your kind fight a different fight ... Writers

are also needed to tell the rest of the world what the struggle is all about." *Kaffir Boy* fulfills this prophetic calling.

Source: Jessica Powers, "Kaffir Boy: An Analysis," in *Suite101.com*, October 17, 2001, pp. 1-2.

Mark Mathabane

In the following essay, Mathabane explains his stance on Kaffir Boy's place in the classroom, arguing for the book's use for appropriate grades and ages rather than an all-out ban.

The Taliban of Afghanistan was notorious for its disdain of independent minds. Its demise gives me hope in the war against America's version of the Taliban: bands of parents who anoint themselves as thought and morality police.

They are found in communities across America, demanding that our high school classrooms and libraries be purged of books whose contents they disagree with. An American Library Association list of their top targets includes the *Harry Potter* series, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Color Purple* and [Huckleberry Finn](#).

My own memoir of my South African childhood, *Kaffir Boy*, is on the list. The mullahs of public schools in [North Carolina](#), Texas, California, Nevada, [New York](#), Virginia, and more than a dozen other states have tried to either restrict the book's use or ban it from the curriculum and the school library.

The main charges are that the book uses "offensive language" and "promotes homosexuality." This stems from my graphic description of one of the most harrowing experiences in my life. When I was 7, hunger drove me to tag along with a ring of boys going to a nearby men's hostel, where, unbeknownst to me,

they planned to prostitute themselves for food. I hadn't eaten a square meal in days, but I declined the food the men were offering in exchange for sexual favors and bolted from the hostel when the boys began undressing.

A reason I included the scene is that resisting peer pressure is one of the toughest things for young people to do. Yet they make such tough choices daily, particularly if they live where abuse, poverty, violence and death are commonplace and innocence dies young.

Stories teach children

That lesson seems lost on censors who want *Kaffir Boy* banned from high schools. Yet hardly any students among the tens of thousands who've read the book, which is required reading in many high schools, complain about the scene. Instead, students tell me in impassioned letters and e-mails that the book teaches them to never give up in the face of adversity, to never waste food, to value books and libraries, to regard education as a powerful weapon of hope, to always strive to do the right thing and to never take freedom for granted.

When I came to America in 1978 to attend college, I was stunned—and exhilarated—to discover that students here could read any book without fear of being harassed, jailed or killed. I remember how my peers died during the 1976 Soweto student rebellion for only dreaming of such freedom. To me, the [First Amendment](#) is the jewel in the crown of American democracy.

A proper response

As a parent of three school-age children, I understand some parents' concern about what their children are assigned to read. But should my child bring home

a book whose contents I find objectionable, the proper thing to do would be to request that my child be assigned a different book.

But that's not what critics of *Kaffir Boy* and other books are doing. They want to rob all of a school's students of the right to decide. Worse, they insist on imposing their own taste and morality on others. But books are not written with readers' comfort in mind. I wrote *Kaffir Boy* to show the world the inhumanity of apartheid and the consequences of dehumanizing others, and to educate people about racial hatred.

It boggles my mind why, given the complex nature of life, any parents would want to deny their children the opportunity to grapple with its exigencies, especially in light of how complicated our world has become since Sept. 11. American students need to learn more rather than less about different cultures and different ways of life.

To those brave teachers out there who are being subpoenaed to defend *Kaffir Boy* and other books they've chosen to broaden the minds of their students and deepen their sensibilities, I say fight such narrow-mindedness, continue to expose your students to the realities of life and continue to challenge them to value the sanctity of their minds. Do not allow them to be invaded by America's Taliban, whose goal is to extinguish the precious lamp of independent thinking, which is the hallmark of the truly free.

Source: Mark Mathabane, "Like the Taliban, Some U.S. Parents Fear Free Minds," in *USA Today*, December 12, 2001, pp. 1-2.

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