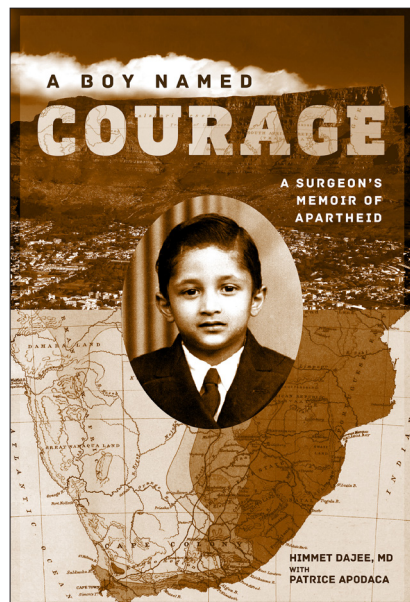




BOOK REVIEW



A Boy Named Courage: A Surgeon's Memoir of Apartheid

By Himmet Dajee with Patrice Apodaca.
Malvern, Penn.: Cynren Press, 2018.
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Himmet Dajee (with Patrice Apodaca) is somewhat of a pioneer in the writing of this beautiful but tangibly angry memoir of the trials and tribulations of a young South African of Indian origin, who had to leave the land of his birth for a foreign country to fulfil his dreams.

Dajee's family were of the 'Mochi' (shoe cobbler) caste, a traditional Indian family in which hard work, discipline and the strict maintenance of Hindu tradition were priorities. His youth was largely shaped by the forces of racial discrimination and a restrictive Hindu culture, the latter emphasised by

his patriarchal father (his mother died when he was 15 years old and his father remarried, leaving the family in disarray). His eldest brother Amrit (who, like others in the extended family and community, thought that Dajee would come to nothing) was admitted to the 'prestigious' University of Cape Town medical school, elevating his status in the Indian community of Cape Town, while Dajee yearned for a future overseas that would free him from the shackles of family, tradition and apartheid. His dream was supported by another brother, Bhanu, of whom he writes touchingly. He was repeatedly refused admission to the UCT medical school (a university liberal in appearance but racially restrictive) but was eventually accepted there for a BSc, which he completed in an alienating environment, despite the sympathies of a few white fellow students and a generous professor. The physiology department at Stellenbosch University denied him an exchange visit between themselves and UCT, resulting in the programme being cancelled. His degree earned him entry into the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, an institution well known for welcoming foreigners of diverse backgrounds, and at which thousands of South African Indians have graduated since the 1950s.

This was a turning point in Dajee's life, and the story becomes one of hard work and success. After graduating as a doctor, he moved to Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, for a residency and was made to feel welcome there. He avoided visiting South Africa, but had no choice when his beloved brother Bhanu was killed by police fire in the 1976 anti-apartheid protests. This nearly broke Dajee, and to add fuel to the flames, government records attributed the death to an attempted robbery, increasing Dajee's ill-feelings towards the country of his birth. The

Canadians gave him refugee status and after his residency Dajee moved to California in the USA, training as a cardiothoracic surgeon at several institutions, the University of California, Los Angeles, being the most notable. He writes in awe of teachers such as the South African-born Hillel Laks and Norman Shumway. Dajee became a sought-after surgeon who eventually went into private practice with his brother Amrit, by now also an established heart surgeon in California. Amrit, we are told, would have returned to South Africa, but his discussions with Professors Jannie Louw and Chris Barnard were discouraging, something that angered Dajee even more. Dajee found Prof. Bruno Reichart more welcoming, but his talk on cardioplegia in Reichart's department was met with scepticism.

Dajee seems to have exorcised old ghosts, and his recent visits to South Africa after the end of apartheid have been happier ones ('... I realize now that I never fully left South Africa because pieces of it came with me and live deep inside me still').

This is a wonderful but somewhat sad story, representative of a common experience in a community designated 'Indian' by the apartheid government, a community whose regard for hard work and success was met with indifference by an uncaring government determined to keep it under the yoke of oppression. Dajee, like many others, refused to bow to pressure, but the question is how many million talented youngsters had their dreams crushed by that iniquitous system?

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