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“It reads like a thriller page after page. . . . The loveliest of Hilda Bernstein’s works about the ugliest of times.”—Albie Sachs, *The Independent*

“Were it not for ordinary heroes like the Bernsteins, South Africa would not be free today.”—*Guardian*

It was 1963 in South Africa during Apartheid when Lionel “Rusty” Bernstein was arrested, along with Nelson Mandela and fifteen other leaders of the African National Congress. They were charged with 221 acts of sabotage designed to “ferment violent revolution.” Rusty was one of two individuals acquitted, and the rest received life sentences. In *The World that was Ours*, his wife, Hilda Bernstein, offers an astonishing personal account of the events leading up to the “Rivonia Trial” and describes how, as a white family with four children, they managed to fight a hostile and unjust regime.

There was a long night ahead. We are unable to read. We listen all the time, listen for the sound of a car in anticipation that the police will come. If he is in the hands of the police, surely they will bring him to the house to search; they always raid after an arrest.

Hilda Bernstein (1915–2006) lived in London, but in 1933 moved to South Africa where she married Lionel Bernstein. She was elected as a Communist to the Johannesburg City Council; helped found the multiracial Federation of South African Women; and worked closely with the African National Congress’ Women’s League in opposition to apartheid.

The World That Was Ours Details

Date : Published July 1st 2009 by Persephone Books (first published 1967)

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Author : Hilda Bernstein

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From Reader Review *The World That Was Ours* for online ebook

Pomegranatehues says

Fascinating and truly a thriller to read. A book that should be passed around to everyone.

Barbara Mader says

Published in 1967, this book is a firsthand account about some of those who fought apartheid. Bernstein provides some historical context about the various organizations and their efforts over the decades, but the focus here is on the early 1960s and the Rivonia Trial (at which Nelson Mandela, and others, received life sentences). Bernstein's husband, Rusty, was the only one to be acquitted, though he would undoubtedly have been re-arrested, and his wife also imprisoned, had they not subsequently fled to England. Both husband and wife lived to see Mandela freed, apartheid ended, and Mandela inaugurated as President of South Africa.

Teresa says

"Bernstein offers a tremendous insider view of the beginning of governmental strictures that heralded the beginning of full apartheid by clearly detailing the numerous ways intimidation can silence an entire population."

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Patrick says

The World That Was Ours is a short memoir by Hilda Bernstein, a woman who was known in her lifetime for her active political career in South Africa. It follows her life during the long years under apartheid rule, and in particular the persecution she and her family suffered as a direct result of their continued campaigning for equality for people of all races. Her husband, the architect Lionel 'Rusty' Bernstein, became regarded as an enemy of the people; eventually he was put on trial for treason and sabotage alongside Nelson Mandela at the notorious Rivonia trials. Lionel was the only defendant to be acquitted of charges — although, in an astonishing example of the country's corrupted justice system, this didn't stop the police immediately re-arresting him on spurious grounds before he could leave the courtroom. Not long afterwards the Bernsteins fled the country to what is now Botswana.

There are passages here where it is of little comfort to know that in the end Hilda and Lionel made it to England, that they revived their careers and lives, and that the government they fought against would prove itself on the wrong side of history. Much of it is haunting in its depiction of cruelty and injustice performed automatically, unthinkingly, by people entirely sure of their convictions. That is if they had any convictions: perhaps they were only cruel. The moment where they are waiting for a train in the middle of the night in Botswana and the South African special branch are standing at the other end of the platform with them — hoping they'll get on, knowing that the train is exclusively staffed by other South Africans — that seems so lurid it must be out of the pages of a thriller.

But most of it is banal. This, she explains, is how she managed to tolerate it for so long: because for so long it was the kind of constant, low-level unpleasantness that could be quietly ignored. Men watch their home all day and all night. Their phones are tapped; they are followed everywhere. Sometimes it is absurd in the aggressively stupid way that only repressive bureaucracies can be absurd: police officers come to their home unannounced to search for seditious materials and take home only books by Russians, convinced those are somehow relevant to communism. And of course there is no process of appeal for any of this. Nothing can be done about it. The author recounts all the times she went to the desk of the sergeants to plead to be allowed just to visit her husband, and how she had to twist and bend the truth just to earn the respect not otherwise due to a woman who wants to visit a man for no other reason than that she loves him.

This book was first published in 1967; for those involved it was by no means an exercise in retrospection. It goes without saying that the whole thing is shaped by the relative (white) privilege of the Bernsteins; but there is still a story that should be told here.

Helena says

kvifor gjekk det så gale i sør-afrika? og det noverande politiske klimaet er ikkje så bra for å sei det mildt

Ayreon says

3.5

Rosemary says

A memoir of South Africa in the 1960s, by a woman who, with her husband, was at the forefront of the white resistance to apartheid. It tells the story of their life in a country that would be idyllic if not for the political situation, her husband's imprisonment and trial and their eventual escape from the country.

I wasn't sure I would like this. Despite being sympathetic to her politics I would probably never have read it if it hadn't been a Persephone book, but it was surprisingly easy to get into. I liked the way that she mixed the personal with the political and didn't go into long justifications of her beliefs or of why the resistance happened in the way that it did. It was just "we decided we had to do this, and then this happened".

It's hard to believe that such a dictatorial regime then continued for almost another 30 years before finally giving way. The fact that the change wasn't more violent when it happened says a huge amount for the leading members of the ANC of all racial backgrounds.

Elaine Ruth Boe says

I purchased this book at the London bookstore, Persephone Books, which publishes previously out-of-print books by women from the mid-20th century. I chose this book because it relates Hilda Bernstein's experience with her husband Rusty during the tense political years of apartheid in South Africa in the 50s and 60s. The

cover mentioned that her husband was tried along with Nelson Mandela in the Rivonia Trials. The extent of my knowledge about apartheid in South Africa was that Nelson Mandela went to prison for a long time in the fight to end it.

I would recommend this book to anyone who would like an introduction to the subject of South Africa or apartheid, anyone who wants to read an account of a strong female political figure, anyone who wants to learn from a woman who balanced her political beliefs with her family obligations, anyone who enjoys a courtroom drama or an escape narrative. Bernstein references many political figures and names that I did not know, but that did not keep me from remaining engrossed in the action. She breaks up her story into four parts: life before Rusty's arrest, his arrest and 90 days in prison, the trial, and their escape to London.

This book is not for the faint-hearted. Do not pick up this book until you have time to read it all. The tension is so intense, her fear so real, and the repercussions of her dissent so deadly that I was anxious the entire time I read. I had to stay up into the early hours of the morning because I just had to see the outcome of the trial. But at the same time, after 3 or so days reading nonstop, I had to take a break for a few days because I was just too overwrought about what was happening. I needed a diversion into fantasy or romcom. This was too intense, too scary, too real. In the end I devoured the book, and I think everyone should know Hilda's story.

Hilda's account was of particular interest to me as I focus my reading on women writers and feminist literature. Throughout the story Hilda talks about how she had to continue to put on a brave face for her children as she worried about her husband's imprisonment. She was taken away from her children when she went to prison in an episode that occurs before the action of the book. Much of her anxiety in the story stems from her struggle to stay true to her political beliefs and remain active even when that puts her own life in jeopardy. What obligations as a mother does she have to stop political activity so she can be there for her young children? She justifies her continued involvement because she wants South Africa to be a better place for her children to grow up in. But in the meantime, she and her husband subject the children to years of fear, police raids, and house arrest. Along the way, Hilda becomes more independent, making decisions without her husband, and she reflects in the Afterword that she didn't realize how independent she had become until she had to resume the wifely role of listening to her husband.

Beautifully written. Important content because of its history and the struggle it addresses about the woman's place. Given the state of the world today, Hilda Bernstein's story might be more relevant than we'd like to imagine.

Kellie Marnoch says

Really good.

(Heavily side-eyeing the Persephone forum on this book. It's...misjudged, at best, and outright racist at worst. Yeah, some white people had it hard, yeah, some white people were heroes, but black South Africans had it so much worse. I'm still interested in this book, but I wish I hadn't read that forum post. It's left a bad taste in my mouth.)

Katy says

Hilda and her husband Rusty lived in South Africa between 1933 and 1964, and were part of the anti-apartheid movement. Rusty was acquitted in 1964 with 2 other men, in the trial which saw Nelson Mandela and several others sentenced to life in prison - this is the story not only of that trial but the years leading up to it when people lived in fear. I learnt a lot I hadn't known and found it moving and powerful. It's been republished by Persephone Books so is also a thing of beauty, and I'm very glad to have read it. I'm astounded by the bravery exhibited by Hilda and her friends and family - it's one of those books that makes you wonder whether you would be prepared to risk so much to stick to your principles and should be required reading in schools.

Annie says

It was a great differing point of view on apartheid from the typical Long Walk to Freedom. Bernstein's husband was the sole man charged in the Rivonia Trials that was found not guilty. The writing was your typical memoir and while it did drag in spots, was overall an excellent recap as to how two white people incredibly involved with anti-apartheid politics were treated under the Nationalist regime and escaped to freedom.

Sue says

A white South African activist writes engagingly about the turbulent 1960's in that country, including she and her husband being jailed—and he being on trial along with Nelson Mandela and the rest of the Rivonia group. But through it all they're raising four children and leading an outwardly normal life of family vacations, helping kids with homework, and family dinners—only their version of normal includes the constant threat of police raids on their house and, when one or both of them isn't already in custody, the constant threat of arrest. It's absorbing and interesting, and her writing is excellent and accessible.

Ali says

The World that was ours, originally published in 1967, and was written at a time when Hilda Bernstein had to disguise certain names and incidents to protect some of the people she had left behind her in South Africa. Amendments were then made later to the original text when it was safe to do so. This is an extremely well written political memoir by the wife of Rusty Bernstein, one of the men in the Rivonia trial, tried alongside Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu – he was later acquitted – but only after having suffered months of mistreatment and isolation in prison.

Hilda Bernstein details the everyday lives of people like her, who had a home and family, had work to do, children to raise, but who lived everyday with the fear of the Special Branch and possible arrest.

“11 July 1963

There was a sense of unease all afternoon. It was true there had been many such days and nights and the premonition is only recalled in its full oppressiveness after disaster has been realised; many, many such times; the precise cause, the months and even the years of them have silently blurred, lost consequence.” Yet the thought of leaving South Africa for people so committed to their cause was extraordinarily hard – do they leave their friends and colleagues? – Or stay and risk being separated from their children? Imprisoned within a system that becomes harder and harder to fight. The Bernsteins risk everything; they are under enormous pressure and frequently know a very real and almost paralysing fear – which Hilda Bernstein

describes brilliantly. The tension and claustrophobia of the South African regime is absolutely palpable. Yet through it all Hilda's love for her husband sees her through these unimaginably difficult times.

"I held on to Rusty, touched him, kissed. We sat clasping each other, alone together. There was nothing in the cell except the narrow bench against the wall. At first we could barely talk, then we began softly, intimately. It was sheer, unbelievable happiness. I thought if I could sit for an hour a day close to you like this, Rusty, just holding on to your hands and talking, life would be completely bearable. That's all I want – just an hour a day in close, quiet contact, alone. At that moment it seemed like the fulfilment of all ambition."

I found the first part of this book where Hilda describes the lives she and her family are leading, both fascinating and poignant. It is almost inconceivable that these things were happening within living memory. I wonder if I would be able to hold quite so fast to my principles in the face of such fear and intimidation. For me however the details surrounding the actual Rivonia trial were rather less exciting than I had expected them to be – but were interesting, thorough and complex. I did find myself frequently horrified and incensed by the prosecutor Yutar, an often nasty tempered, irrational man.

After Rusty's eventual release – Hilda is the one who now must fear for her freedom. It becomes clear that the Bernsteins must leave. However that is rather easier said than done. To leave involves great secrecy. It is not possible to just go, Hilda needs to judge it just right, she will be leaving her children behind, at least in the short term. However while keeping one eye on the road outside and the garden path, ready to flee; she gets on with her washing. Such is the life of a woman living with the threat of arrest in 1960's South Africa. The details surrounding Hilda and Rusty's flight steps the action up considerably. I found it unimaginable – to be driven through the dark at great risk to an unknown destination – into an unknown fate, no guarantees when or even if, they will see those they love again.

The World that was ours is an enormously readable memoir which highlights brilliantly the evil injustices that were practised in South Africa – and the extraordinary men and women who stood up for what was right.

Harry McDonald says

Wonderful. Enthralling, moving, enraging, shaming... I've learnt a lot from reading this, but not nearly enough. Bernstein is a superb writer, and in this book she ties her own experience into the context of Apartheid South Africa, and the struggle to end it.

Deborah says

Wonderful Persephone cover, as always
