



# We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation

*Justine van der Leun*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

# We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation

*Justine van der Leun*

## We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation Justine van der Leun

In the vein of the podcast Serial, a gripping investigation of an iconic murder case that calls into question the accepted narrative that has come to exemplify the process of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa

The story of Amy Biehl is well known in South Africa: After the twenty-six-year-old white American Fulbright scholar was brutally murdered on August 25, 1993, during the final, fiery days of apartheid by a mob of young black men in a township outside Cape Town, her parents' forgiveness of two of her killers became a symbol of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa. Inspired by the story, Justine van der Leun, an American writer living in South Africa, decided to introduce it to an American audience. But as she delved into the case, the prevailing narrative started to unravel. Why didn't the eyewitness reports agree on who killed Amy Biehl? Were the men convicted of the murder actually responsible for her death? And then van der Leun stumbled on another brutal crime committed on the same day, in the very same area. The story of Amy Biehl's death, it turned out, was not the story hailed in the press as a powerful symbol of forgiveness, but was in fact more reflective of the complicated history of a troubled country.

We Are Not Such Things is the result of van der Leun's four years investigating this strange, knotted tale of injustice, violence, forgiveness, and redemption. It is a gripping journey through the bizarre twists and turns of this case and its aftermath—and the story that emerges of what happened on that fateful day in 1993 and the decades that followed provides an unsparing account of life in South Africa today. Like Katherine Boo and Tracy Kidder, van der Leun immerses herself in the lives of her subjects. With her stark, moving portrait of a township and its residents, she provides a lens through which we come to understand that the issues at the heart of her investigation—truth and reconciliation, loyalty, justice, race, and class—are universal in scope and powerful in resonance. We Are Not Such Things reveals how reconciliation is impossible without an acknowledgment of the past, a lesson just as relevant to America today as to a South Africa still struggling with the long shadow of its history.

## We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation Details

Date : Published June 28th 2016 by Spiegel & Grau (first published June 21st 2016)

ISBN : 9780812994506

Author : Justine van der Leun

Format : Hardcover 448 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Crime, True Crime, History, Cultural, Africa, Mystery, Southern Africa, South Africa



[Download We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, ...pdf](#)



[Read Online We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young America ...pdf](#)

---

**Download and Read Free Online We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation Justine van der Leun**

---

## **From Reader Review We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation for online ebook**

### **Esil says**

We Are Not Such Things is a really interesting book. Justine Van der Leun is an American who moved to South Africa a few years ago with her South African born husband. She wasn't sure what to do with herself, so she set out to write a book about Amy Biehl, who was a young white American Fulbright scholar killed in South Africa during an uprising toward the end of Apartheid. The unusual thing about Biehl's death is that her parents publicly forgave four men implicated in Amy's killing and created a charitable foundation that employs two of them. The book is as much about Biehl and her death as it is about Van der Leun's quest, including the relationships she developed with the individuals involved. Van der Leun does a great job of providing a tremendous amount of information about the history and current politics of South Africa. She also does a really good job of depicting this incredibly complex country. She really brings to life many of the individuals she meets -- who represent an impressive cross-section of South Africans from different backgrounds -- and the environments they live in. At times, the details of her journey felt like too much information and the book lost its focus. But this is a relatively minor criticism. Don't read this book if you want a definitive answer to what happened to Biehl. Do read this book if you want an interesting perspective on contemporary South Africa. Thank you to the publisher and Netgalley for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

---

### **Angel Hatfield says**

Easy had been part of a mob twenty years earlier that had hunted down a young white American girl. He hurled jagged bricks at her and stabbed at her while she begged for her life. She died that day and her name was Amy Behliel and she was twenty six years old. The man's name was Easy and he got eighteen years in prison . He said at the time his spirit said kill the white. Amy had been two black students a ride when she was pulled from her car. There were three other men who admitted to going in on with Easy to kill Amy. S. Africa had been in the final days of apartheid the entire country seemed on the verge of civil war. The country had just been through forty five years of state regulated racial segregation and Black S. Africans had been contained in slums with no rights. Amy was an activists for the black people and had studied for almost a year on the rights and roles of disadvantaged women and children of color. The four men spent a couple of years in prison and under a new law were released.

I did not know about this murder but this book was so interesting. I don.t think i met to request this story but was glad I got it after reading it. I feel the author did an excellent job on this as it was a true event. I do highly recommend.

I received an ARC of this story for an honest review.

---

### **Julie says**

We Are Not Such Things: The Murder of a Young American, a South African Township, and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation by Justine van der Leun is a 2016 Spiegel & Grau publication. I was provided a

copy of this book by the publisher and Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

I read true crime on occasion, but I probably would not have selected this book without a little prodding, and the marketing ploy that suggested that this book was 'in the vein of' the podcast, "Serial".

This book does not resemble the podcast in any way, shape, or form. So if that is what you think you are getting when you start this book, you will be very disappointed.

Still, I am the type of person that once committed, will not, if at all possible, give up on a book. So, I plodded on and on and on. I managed to complete the book, but it took me a good long while to do so, and I struggled with it mightily.

Once I started reading the book, a vague memory began to surface, and I realized I remembered hearing about this case on the news way back in the 1990's. In those days I did not, and still do not, watch the news if I can help it, but the case made national headlines, and this was well before social media had taken hold, before you heard all about something whether you wanted to or not, so it was a big story there for a while. I remember the media really playing up Amy's anti-apartheid activism and the irony of her murder by an angry mob aimed at killing whites.

The story got even weirder, when Amy's parents arrived in South Africa, embracing the men accused of murdering their daughter. This act by Linda and Peter Biehl became a symbol for the Truth and Reconciliation process.

Twenty years later, Justine van der Leun moved to South Africa with her husband, and finding herself at loose ends, becomes interested in Amy's case, especially when it comes to light that the men who went to prison for her murder, may, in fact, be innocent.

Naturally, one cannot write a book about Amy's murder without explaining the racial and political climate of South Africa in the early 90's. The author painted a vivid picture the country, the divisions, the way of life and so on.

She even inserted herself into the personal life of Easy Nofemala, giving the reader an in depth look at his life and the inconsistencies of his story.

While some real doubt is raised about what actually took place the day Amy died, there are no pat answers. It's left up to the reader to make sense of what happened that day, and frankly, you won't be able to discern that based on the information collected here.

The book is very disorganized, or dishveled, and is more about the country than the crime, more about men accused of the crime, than about the crime itself. This true crime is not at its best, and while parts of the book are indeed very interesting, it seemed to ramble and go into exhausting meanderings that had my eyes crossing in sheer boredom.

This book was obviously a huge undertaking, extremely ambitious, and complex, but at the end of the day, for me at least, it didn't live up the expectations I had going in and was not at all the type of story I was anticipating.

Overall, this one gets 3 stars

---

## Laura says

I wish that I could give this more than one star but I really did not enjoy it. I was suckered in by the blurb's comparison to the *Serial* podcast, but while *Serial* was a masterpiece of storytelling, this book was a flabby meandering mess.

*We Are Not Such Things* is supposedly an investigation into the 1993 murder of Amy Biehl, a young white American Fulbright Scholar studying in South Africa in a time of social and political upheaval. Biehl was beaten to death in Gugulethu township outside Cape Town by a mob of anti-apartheid and black rights protesters. Four of her killers were convicted and imprisoned before being released via Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Linda and Peter Biehl, Amy's parents, attended the TRC hearings and openly forgave their daughter's killers. They founded the Amy Biehl foundation and gave two of the killers, Easy and Ntobeko, jobs working for the charity. The story garnered lots of media attention and was held up by many as an example of unity and the triumph of the TRC.

Fast forward around 20 years and Justine van der Leun a white, American erstwhile travel writer, moves to South Africa with her husband. At a loss for anything to do, she begins to research the Biehl case, interviewing Easy, Linda, and many others.

Here's a bullet list of my problems with this book:

1) **So much extraneous detail** This book could easily be edited down to less than 200 pages without losing ANY pertinent information. It was actually amazing how rambly and unfocused it was. Most sections would go something like this: ["I met so-and-so to talk about this-and-that"], [Twelve paragraph description of where they were when they met, what they were eating, what colour the sky was, every single person in the vicinity], [Three random pages about the TRC/gugulethu/corruption in the SA police/history of SA politics], ["So I asked this person what they knew about the Biehl case. They shrugged"], [Next, I met so-and-so], *ad infinitum*.

Here is an actual example of a preamble to a witness interview:

*"Mzi and I were sharing an egg salad sandwich from the supermarket. Mzi's five-year-old nephew was alternately doing cartwheels around us and sucking on a red lollipop that was slowly staining his white tank top. Then he changed into a green T-shirt and had a piece of cake, which he smeared on his new outfit".*

I'm not joking, literally none of the that information had ANY bearing on anything. I think the idea behind these 'asides' is to add character and build up an idea of time and place but none of the information is in any way interesting and if you cut all of this stuff out the book would be at least a hundred pages shorter (and probably a lot better). It was infuriating.

2) **There's no pay-off** Throughout the first three-quarters of this 450-page-long book, van der Leun hints that she's made a dark discovery about the case, and everything is not as it seems. But what she 'discovers' is really not revelatory. In fact, it's basically irrelevant - revealing it will not affect anyone's lives at all. Furthermore, the way she went about revealing these benign tidbits was tortuous and totally not worth it.

Then, weirdly, after the supposed big reveal, the book goes on for another 70 pages talking about nothing in

particular, then it just tails off!

3) **ME, ME, ME** I found the author incredibly self-absorbed. So much of what she wrote was just virtue signalling - yes, she was a privileged white woman living in a wealthy neighbourhood, but the people of the township took her in and accepted her as one of their own! They called her when they had emotional problems (eg, Ndumi), they all knew who she was! She was basically one of them by the end of it :) :) - blergh. Yeah, except she headed back to her massive house and full fridge at the end of every day.

I definitely got a whiff of white-saviourism from this. I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with a white American going into South Africa to investigate a decades-old racially motivated murder, but I think she lacked the humility and self-awareness to pull it off. The way she referred to Easy sometimes made me physically cringe ("But twice, for his birthday, when I presented him with what he referred to as "birthday chicken", an entire roasted bird, he ate it all by himself in under thirty minutes, **very neatly**. Years later, I emailed him a Happy Birthday message, and promised to maintain our tradition when I next came to Cape Town. 'I can't wait to have my birthday chicken when you are back in South Africa chickens are few now and thanks so much to remember my birthday chicken', he replied" [Emphasis my own] [While this is a an isolated passage, I feel like this tone cropped up again and again the book and didn't sit well with me])

4) **It was a bit unfair** I think two people in particular - Ntobeko and Linda Biehl - were unfairly maligned in this book.

First, Ntobeko falls out with van der Leun because he didn't want her to tell his story. He wanted to write a book about it himself and he felt that the story was being appropriated by an outsider. I think that is a pretty legitimate stance to take - the author isn't from South Africa and just waltzed into the country twenty years after the fact, writing and researching a book fuelled solely (in my personal opinion, not Ntobeko's) by white privilege and misplaced confidence - but rather than addressing this, van der Leun paints him as angry and slightly unhinged.

Further, Linda Biehl, Amy's mother (and let's remember, a woman whose 26-year-old daughter was murdered and who went on to openly forgive her killers), ends up taking Ntobeko's side and issues a legal request for van der Leun to desist from writing the book and researching the subject. Again, van der Leun disregards her wishes in quite a callous way, vaguely intimating that by that point she felt part of the story and part of the Gugulethu community (blergh), and publishes the book anyway.

Anyway, this has turned into a much longer review than I intended, but I really did struggle with this book.

*(With thanks to NetGalley and the publishers for providing me with an ARC copy in return for an honest review)*

---

### **Megan says**

Like the author, I am married to a white South African, and I've spent a good bit of time in the country as well. Van der Leun can write very well, and she piercingly describes the contrast between the townships and informal settlements and the gilded neighborhoods of Cape Town. This is one of the most dissonant aspects of life in SA: the first world smashing up against the third. And she also highlights the slippery nature of truth and reconciliation in a country that remains so divided and unequal.

For me, there are two serious flaws: One, the "reveal" which she builds up for the first 2/3 of the book never

really pans out. I am left with "so what? what now?" It's telling that Linda Biehl sends her a cease and desist letter while she is still in the process of writing. What does that reveal indicate about the case itself? How does it affect Amy Biehl's mother? How are we supposed to see the case and the country differently as a consequence?

Second, van der Leun has said that she is indebted to writers like Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, and I think she would have done well to adopt LeBlanc's writerly distance. Van der Leun is a deeply problematic storyteller, for me. All of the characters, white and black, are caricatures: white women covered with diamonds and bemoaning the laziness of blacks, blacks with an insatiable appetite for fried chicken and "jabbering" in Xhosa. I think of the white South Africans I know, many of whom are working tirelessly to ameliorate social inequity and to educate others about the effects of apartheid and systemic discrimination. Additionally, van der Leun's friends in the township speak to her about their political activism, their incarceration, their appearance before the TRC--all intimate, painful topics--and then she is indignant and surprised when some of them ask her for money or rides afterwards. She seems so ignorant of what they have just given \*her\* that she can't believe their audacity at asking for something in return.

Books like this are why I won't write about South Africa.

---

## **Bam says**

Amy Biehl, an American Fulbright scholar attending university in Cape Town, South Africa, was set upon by an angry mob and brutally murdered on August 25, 1993, in the waning days of apartheid. Four young men were sentenced to prison for her death but two were later granted forgiveness for their crimes by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under President Mandela. Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, attended the proceedings and were entirely in agreement, feeling the best way to honor Amy was to form a foundation in her name that would help the people of the community, employ these young men and help them build better lives.

Twenty years later, journalist Justine van der Leun set out to learn 'the Big Truth.' Were these young men political activists fighting to help bring down apartheid or merely bloodthirsty hooligans? Had in fact the right people been identified for the crime or were these four merely plucked out of the crowd to make sure a form of justice was served? What motivated the Biehls to be so forgiving? And has their foundation accomplished anything after more than twenty years?

The author talked to many of the people involved in the case and grew quite fond of Easy, one of the accused men who now works for the Amy Biehl Foundation as a driver. But even from him, the one she got to know the best, Justine was never quite sure she was getting a straight answer, since his story changed from time to time, and others who knew him and were witnesses that fateful day had different slants on what they remembered as 'the truth.' Most of all, Easy would like Justine to believe that "we are not such things."

This is first and foremost a human interest story about the sad and needless death of one young woman who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and about the workings of mob mentality. But the author fleshes out the story well by giving the reader an encapsulated view of the history of South Africa in general: how and why Europeans came to settle the area, how apartheid developed for the benefit of the white population and how it fell apart, and how civil war was circumvented under Mandela, who sought to build a better nation for all. In doing so, she gives the reader an idea about what life is like for black South Africans now, but more importantly to the story, what things were like for them under apartheid. Along the way, Justine learns some 'Life Lessons'--that there might be two, three or more sides to the truth, depending on who is telling the story.

I thoroughly enjoyed the chance to learn more about South Africa and wish to thank the author, publisher and Net-Galley for the opportunity to read an advanced readers copy of this important work.

---

### **Mainon says**

I recently spent a week in South Africa, and found myself wanting a little more insight into the country. I was familiar with Mandela and Tutu and had even studied the post-apartheid Truth & Reconciliation Commission briefly, but those are all high-level, international-scale perspectives. I wanted something more personal.

What I found was this book. When I stumbled onto it, I knew nothing about Amy Biehl, a white American activist who was brutally murdered in South Africa in 1993. Her parents started a foundation in her name, and publicly embraced the TRC process, eventually reconciling and working closely with two of the men convicted of Amy's murder.

Twenty years later, Justine van der Leun decided to write Amy's story, and ended up as a quasi-investigative journalist, digging beyond published facts and public stories to try to get at buried memories and forgotten connections. She was in many ways more successful than I would have imagined she could be, and some of what she uncovered is fascinating and moving and thought-provoking. At the same time, the foreshadowing of her findings was a little heavy-handed; the first half is full of "little did I know then..."-type teasers that, cumulatively, I found annoying and distracting. Nonetheless, I appreciated her thoroughness: she spent literally years visiting some of the people involved on a frequent basis. It's clear that some of the characters grew to trust her so much that they gave her unprecedented access, not only to their impressions, memories, and opinions, but to their current experiences. The latent anthropologist in me loved the slices of Xhosa cultural traditions and language, and I even ended up on YouTube to try to learn how to pronounce Xhosa correctly (hint: it involves a click of the type you might make to "giddyup" a horse -- I recommend this YouTube video if you'd like to hear it yourself).

Recommended for world travelers, for those interested in other cultures or in South Africa particularly, for true crime aficionados, and for anyone interested in the problematized social constructs of truth, justice, guilt, and the like. In some ways, the poignant lack of easy answers in this book may illuminate the complexity of America's own race issues, their prominence recently heightened by the tragedies of Treyvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and too many others.

I received a copy of this ebook from the publisher in exchange for my honest review. Thanks!

---

### **Krista says**

This honest review is in response to an ARC given to me by NetGalley.

I find it hard to sum up "We Are Not Such Things." This story is one writer's exploration of what actually happened to Amy Biehl, an American student who was killed in 1993 in South Africa as part of a worked-up mob action. The book extensively features the author's first-hand (and often, hard-fought) interviews many participants and their families.

But this book is far, far more than that. It is not a search for a humanity, but a steady, painful insistence that humanity has been part of this story all along, and continues to be. Justine Van Der Leun is using Amy Biehl's story to talk about ongoing problems with South Africa, and she spares nobody, including herself.

It's hard to critique the work. While I started off cringing with the assumption this book would be a "white savior/mystical black African people" narrative, by the end of the book you have a 3D image of the main black African characters, and JVDL shows her own limits (and those of charity types) as well. The book is relentlessly sad and infuriating, but this goes with the topic matter. (JVDL's use of characterization both lightens the mood at times and makes the failings of individuals more disappointing.)

In short: This is a devastating, intelligent work that leaves one with a lot to ponder regarding South Africa, how we treat the past, and our responsibilities for the present.

---

### **Lynn says**

Amy Bielh was a white anti-apartheid activist who was brutally killed by a group of blacks in an South African township. Men were arrested, convicted and jailed for the crime. Years later with the help of the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" the convicted confessed to their crimes and received amnesty. Remarkably the Biehls forgave the killers, started a foundation, and even employed some of the men.

Enter Justine van der Leun who decides to write a book about the incident 20 years later. This quest takes her on a very long (4 years), confusing, revealing, and tenacious journey towards the real story. The book does a wonderful job of describing the plight of black South Africans and you get a real feel for the good and the bad of this complicated country. It is a story of race, loyalty, injustice, compassion, betrayal, secrets, ulterior motives, and the deleterious impact of widespread institutionalized racism.

However, the book was much too long and repetitive. I also found the ending anti-climatic. If you are looking for a definitive story of exactly what happened that day you will not find it. Instead you are left with more questions but questions are good.

---

### **Lissa says**

In 1993 Amy Biehl drove into a South African Township around the time of the dissolution of Apartheid. Her death at that moment became a media target for how the new South Africa politics would work and what constitutes politically motivated violence. The author discovered this story after moving to Cape Town with her fiancé and realizing that while numerous articles had followed the story, a book had never been written. She then threw herself into the research and made close acquaintance with many of the people involved. This is not an easy story and there is definitely not a clean conclusion. South Africa is a place with a tumultuous and violent history of race relations (not very much unlike my own country) and the riot that eventually killed Amy was not a clear cut murder case but instead a convoluted event with many people involved and too many differing accounts to keep track of. This book is extremely well written and the author does an incredible job of fairly telling the complicated story. I received this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

---

## **Penny Schmuecker says**

It is hard to believe that it has been 22 years since the end of apartheid in South Africa. As often happens, the passage of time often lessens the intensity of things: As we get farther and farther away from a situation, we forget how outraged we were or the extreme happiness we felt. Most people probably have not even heard of Amy Biehl. While her tragic murder was headline news at the time, her name surfaces fewer and fewer times and in the larger picture, apartheid is talked about less and less. We lose fascination with things on a more regular basis because in today's world, it seems there is always some bigger news story to read.

Amy Biehl was a 26-year old American and a Stanford University graduate who had gone to Cape Town, South Africa on a Fulbright scholarship in 1992 and was a witness to the crumbling of apartheid laws that had crippled South Africa since 1948. Her activism ultimately led to her death on August 25, 1993 when she was brutally killed in an attack in Gugulethu Township as she drove a group of three friends home. Although the murder was a mob scene, four people were ultimately arrested and tried for her murder.

As part of South Africa's abolishment of apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed as a means of granting amnesty to anyone who believed they had been a victim of violence under apartheid laws. As part of this, political prisoners, of which there were many, could also go before the commission and request amnesty. Violent protests by members of the black majority parties often resulted in indiscriminate arrests which suppressed an uprising and allowed the ruling party to remain in power. By allowing those arrested to come before the Commission and state their case, the TRC hoped to bring a small amount of peace and empowerment to the black majority who had been barbarically treated for years.

Justine van der Leun researched Amy's story and at the same time provided a history of white settlement in South Africa and how this tremendously impoverished nation became a cauldron of anger that was just waiting to boil over. Never boring, the background that she provides lends itself to a clearer picture of what happened the day that Amy drove into the Township of Gugulethu.

The four men arrested for Amy's murder were ultimately pardoned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Intrigued by the fact that Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, also decided to forgive their daughter's murderers, Justine van der Leun spent four years researching the facts of this unlikely story. What she found was perhaps more than she bargained for. She tracked down and befriended the four men who had been arrested, contacted and interviewed witnesses to this murder which happened at a township gas station, and spent countless hours scouring news articles and government documents pertaining to the murder. She discovered that there were about as many accounts of the event as there were people in the mob that day. However, van der Leun delved into just one of many tragic stories of apartheid and came up with a story that will leave a scar on you. This is one of the most informative, well-researched books that I have read in some time. Truly understanding Amy's death must also mean understanding the tumultuous political culture of South Africa during apartheid and Justine van der Leun has done a phenomenal job in explaining both. This book is a winner!

---

My sincere thanks to Justine van der Leun, the publisher, and NetGalley for the privilege of reading an ARC of this compelling book.

## **Debbie says**

Thank you to netgalley for a free copy of this book in exchange for a fair review.

I don't really know how to review this book. I picked it up not knowing very much about South Africa and apartheid. I finished it with a much better understanding of the harm apartheid continues to reap to this country.

This is one of the most engrossing books I have ever read. Justine spent many years researching Amy Biehl's murder. She befriended everyone involved even peripherally in the crime. She reviewed every document she could find from the government, police and courts. She searched for the truth of what happened that day.

In the crazy entirely messed up world of South Africa politics and culture it's almost impossible to discern the truth of anything.

---

## **Deborah says**

4.5 stars

I belong to the Newest Literary Fiction Goodreads group, and our monthly buddy reads are usually (you guessed it) new lit fic. For July, however, our moderator challenged us to read as many non-fiction books from our TBR lists as we could find room for. Although at last count I had 97 non-fiction books waiting to be read, I had been moving them to the bottom of my list; they sounded interesting, but, really, reading non-fiction is too much work. I don't want to have to learn anything during my pleasure reading time (said in that lovely teenage whine we parents all adore). Nevertheless, I decided to accept the challenge, at least to the extent of reading one book, and picked up Justine van der Leun's *We Are Not Such Things*. The title was taken from one of the defendants at the Amy Biehl murder trial in South Africa:

STATE LAWYER : You see what I am going to suggest to you, Mr. Nofemela, is that the attack and brutal murder of Amy Biehl could not have been done with a political objective. It was wanton brutality, like a pack of sharks smelling blood. Isn't that the truth?

EASY NOFEMELA : No, that's not true, that's not true. We are not such things.

I had originally added this book to my TBR list for several reasons. As a lawyer, I was interested in the criminal justice process in South Africa in light of my recent research into personal freedoms in Africa and the Middle East. I remembered the Amy Biehl murder on the news. Given the current breakdown in race relations in the United States and the call for reparations for institutionalized racism, I wanted to see how South Africa, once the most openly racist nation in the world, handled that issue, and having handled a case involving a white South African years ago, I wondered whether the assumptions made about him were based in fact. While van der Leun addressed all of these questions, she did so not as a pedant, but by incorporating them within a well-written and very engaging story centered around real people: the black men convicted of murdering Amy and their relationships with each other, their communities, and (surprisingly) Amy's parents.

The narrative flowed back and forth in time and among points of view, but its non-linearity was not confusing. Instead, it brought into stark relief a point too many of us forget in the heat of an apparent injustice: there is no single "true" account of any human drama. Witnesses focus on and remember different

things; observations and memories may change over time as different interpretations arise or motives are exposed. Along the way, I did manage to learn a few facts about South African culture and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

My only complaint was van der Leun's decision to devote three of the final chapters to Daniel de Villiers, a white man attacked by a black mob on the same day as Amy's murder. In the book's opening chapter, van der Leun implied that de Villiers's experience radically altered the "truth" surrounding Amy's death:

After months of frenzied searching, I had finally found an old and ruined man who had also been in Gugulethu on that August 25, 1993, though few remembered him. Nobody had ever told his account of that day, nor made the chilling links between what had happened to him and what had happened to Amy Biehl five hours and a quarter mile away. The old man knew something about brutal mobs and racial violence, and he was the final piece in the jigsaw I had been painstakingly piecing together for two years.

Even after three chapters, I failed to see any meaningful connection between de Villiers and Amy, so I ended the book resenting van der Leun's change in focus and momentum (not a good place for an author to leave a reviewer). Van de Leun lost half a star for this misstep, but overall, she successfully suppressed my bias against non-fiction (for now, at least).

I received a free copy of *We Are Not Such Things* from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

---

### **Lori L (She Treads Softly) says**

We Are Not Such Things by Justine van der Leun is a very highly recommended account of the story behind the headline. During the last days of apartheid, on August 25, 1993, Amy Biehl, a 26 year old white American Fullbright scholar, women's rights advocate, and anti-apartheid activist, was murdered by a mob in Cape Town, South Africa. Four young black men were convicted for the crime.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation program was put in place four years later - once apartheid was officially over. The Truth and Reconciliation program was an experiment in restorative justice and offered release from prison and a clean slate to anyone who took full responsibility for their crimes and could also prove that their crimes were politically motivated. Two men who were convicted for Amy's murder were released under this program. Amy's parents publicly forgave those involved with Amy's murder and started a foundation carrying Amy's name. The foundation even gave the men who were released jobs.

Van der Leun, who was initially interested first in how the forgiveness in the Reconciliation program affected real individuals, later became intrigued by the discrepancies surrounding Amy Biehl's murder. Even though it had been twenty years since the tragedy, she decided to dig deeper, and meet the people involved. She wanted to uncover the real story and ended up forging relationships with several men involved. She also presents background information and history of the colonial legacies present in South Africa. Many of the events started years ago are what lead to the huge gulf between blacks and whites that continue to this day.

We Are Not Such Things is a fascinating, well-researched look into a specific highly publicized murder case. Van der Leun makes it clear that there are still issues between the races today in South Africa. It becomes abundantly clear that the governmental systems in South Africa are broken, or extremely dysfunctional, which made getting information or trying to research difficult. She also asks some difficult questions and uncovers questions about the true story of Amy Biehl's murder.

I was totally immersed in this story. It is about a murder, and van der Leun thought it was going to answer the question, "How could the Biehls forgive their daughter's murderers?" and address their celebrity status over their forgiveness. But then it evolved into a story about South Africa - its social problems and people. I could see where some repetition of what people said could be bothersome to some readers but I didn't have a problem with it. It seemed to reflect what she was experiencing or being told by people she was talking to, the repeating of a story, right or wrong, without question. It took many interviews and questions to uncover a glimmer of the truth.

Disclosure: My advanced reading copy was courtesy of the publisher for review purposes.

---

### **Lela says**

What did I think of this book? Hmm - good question. It is very interesting and full of the story of a particular time in the history of South Africa told from a point of view rarely given light. The author begins with a quest to answer questions about the beating and murder of a young, idealist white woman by a gang of young black men in the township of Gugulethu. The young woman's parents and her supposed killers took part in the Reconciliation project of Mandela, Tutu and others. But the author finds the facts and the words just don't add up. I learned so much from this book and my mind kept going to what is happening in our country with all the killings & murders of young black men and the protesting of the obvious racism. This book has much to recommend it and in many ways it deserves more than my 3 stars. However, I felt there were too many time shifts and too much repetition and in need of some editor to cut it down. I know stories are often given depth by both of time shifts and repetition, but, for me, there was just too much of a good thing. We who are far from the trauma of South Africa want to believe in the end of the oppression of apartheid. We want to believe in the beauty of reconciliation. This book gives us instead the grittier, uglier truth of how difficult it is to accomplish either of those things when dealing with people who have always been oppressed and another set who have always been masters. It is an enlightening book - very well researched - as nonjudgmental as it is possible to be. It is heartbreaking. I wish it had left me feeling hopeful. I would like to be a Pollyanna but now that's impossible!

HAVE CHANGED RATING TO 4. After rating another book a 3, I realized my real problem was matter of form. This story has stuck with me and given me much to think about - so I changed the rating to a 4.

---