

NEWS YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO KNOW

# noseweek

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ISSUE 247 MAY 2020



**GUPTA LOOT:**  
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sue crooks when  
it colluded in the  
crookery?

*Cyril's scary  
China deal:*  
are we that  
desperate?

**Larry Klayman**  
America's top  
conspiracy  
litigant

*Never take a  
hypochondriac  
to a pandemic*





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# noseweek

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# Letters

Letters to the editor should be sent by email to [editor@noseweek.co.za](mailto:editor@noseweek.co.za)

## Noseweek's deliveries in the time of Corona

I WAS SO HAPPY TO SEE MY COPY IN THE driveway on Saturday morning.

In these peculiar times, someone is trying hard to maintain normality.

**Roger Lishman**  
Fourways

■ I RECEIVED THE PRINT COPY LAST WEEK and thoroughly enjoyed reading it. Fully understand the predicament we all find ourselves in – the main drive is to stay sane!

**John Binns**  
Cape Town

■ SOME KIND WOMAN DROPPED OFF MY APRIL issue and one addressed to another lady in Breda Park. I put it in her letter box. Have just finished reading mine, Many thanks again.

**Charles Taylor**  
Oranjezicht

■ WHAT A LOVELY SURPRISE TO RECEIVE AN internet copy of *Noseweek*. Thanks for all the trouble you and your staff went to – it is really appreciated!

**Merle van Vuuren**  
Mossel Bay

■ THANK YOU, GREAT SERVICE. WILL MISS MY printed copy but can at least follow on

my computer despite all the problems.

**RT Harris**  
Morningside

■ IN THE ABSENCE OF POSTAL DELIVERIES, sending subscribers a pdf of the magazine by email was an excellent mitigating measure. In fact I rather like it... especially since I live in the gamadoelas and usually only receive my posted copy at the end of each month, thanks to the PO shenanigans. You know all about it.

**Ingrid Luyt**  
Hogsback

## Tannenbaum liquidators' high fees and low performance

READING YOUR ARTICLE ABOUT THE LIQUIDATION of the Tannenbaum Estate and the extraordinary fees the lawyers charged sent me to my quotes file which gave me the following.

From Ogden Nash: "A lawyer is a learned gentleman who rescues your estate from your enemies and keeps it for himself."

And from Jean Giraudoux: "Professional men they have no cares; whatever happens they get theirs."

**Jack Ragsdale**  
Claremont

## Cape Town's DA council pumping sewage

I ENJOYED YOUR PROFILE OF ACTIVIST photographer Jean Tresfon whose focus is now on the clouds of sewage Cape Town is pumping into the sea. (*Nose 246*)

What is the situation with other coastal metros like Nelson Mandela Bay and Durban? I can't believe that this is a CT-only problem. National government will have to intervene to solve the sewage problem all over SA.

**Emil Scharf**  
Cape Town

■ AND THIS IS A CITY RUN BY THE DA! There's no difference; all political parties are up to the same crap.

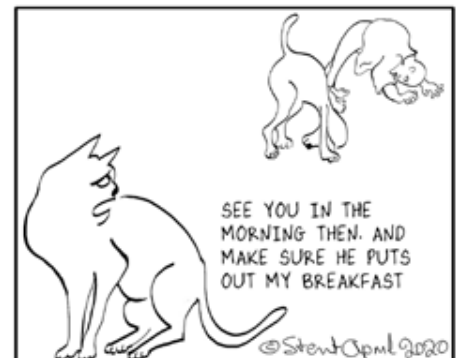
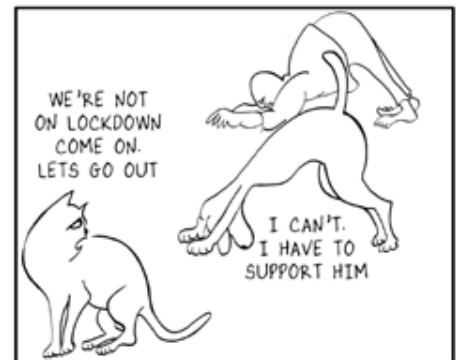
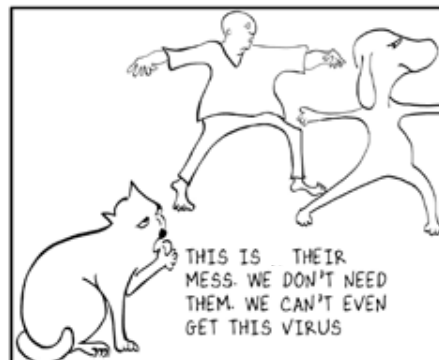
**Duncan Ferreira**  
Via Facebook

■ YES, THERE ARE A FEW OF THESE "submarine pipes" leading into the sea, approximately 50m deep. Regional governments have not been able to manage themselves, let alone a crisis.

They cannot think long term. We should be at the forefront of recycling, renewable energy, provision for all sorts of sub-industries. Councilors need to be held liable, and prosecuted for supporting criminal activity... zero tolerance. We have the creative minds

## PETS IN THE TIME OF CORONA

Stent



and people to achieve remarkable things, but leadership needs to come from the top.

**Greg Hirst**  
Cape Town

■ THE THING IS, THE PRIVILEGED FROM THE CITY bowl all the way around to Llandudno and Hout Bay don't want a sewage treatment plant in their space.

**Abdul-Aleem Somers**  
Seychelles

## The season of Corona

IN THIS EXTRAORDINARY SEASON OF COVID-19, I cannot understand how it is possible for our law enforcement agencies to arrest, prosecute and fine transgressors for price gouging, fake news dissemination, disregarding stay-at-home orders etc, yet it is so difficult (impossible?) to arrest all of those responsible for looting our coffers, capturing our state, general corruption and causing us to slump into junk status.

Can anyone out there please explain?

**Rob Clarck**  
By email

See editorial and story on page 12 – Ed.

■ IN A RECENT ESSAY BY CHARLES EISENSTEIN, titled "The Coronation" he makes the point that governments cannot continue in the comfortable way they have done up to now.

We in SA really need to seize the opportunity to make the government understand that they cannot just pay attention to the newsworthy, attention-grabbing stuff. They will need to work differently and their structures will have to be 'peopled' by those who truly can serve the people in the most effective way: doctors, nurses, laboratory staff – rather than clerks, admin officers, deputy directors who have no medical qualifications or experience.

It is largely because of our bloated bureaucracy that the rating agencies will continue to downgrade us - it's huge, it's ineffective and it's very expensive. The Covid-19 pandemic has made clear that all those thousands of staff are not the ones that a health system needs; The Health minister has now had to ask the REAL health professionals to come out of retirement and please help.

**Linda Rose**  
By email

■ DEAR PRESIDENT RAMAPHOSA AND MINISTER Kubayi-Ngubane,

We would like to commend you for the swift action in implementing our lock down to combat the spread of Covid-19. It was exactly the right thing to do.

Also the announcement setting out the clear 5-level road map for the gradual relaxation of the lock down, and the various forms of financial support that are being made available.

However, it is with disappointment that we note that the Tourism Relief Fund has been structured to provide relief only to

B-BBEE and tourism graded entities. We are not in favour of any criteria that have a racial, gender, age, religious or other bias, such as tourism grading, as we believe that all taxpaying tourism related enterprises should benefit from any form of government relief. The impact of Covid-19 does not discriminate.

**If there was a disaster at sea,  
we doubt that the directive  
would be given to only save  
B-BBEE souls in distress.  
The primary objective must be  
to try and save everybody.**

As the Wakkerstroom Tourism Association, our members, with one exception, have agreed to make our voice heard and hopefully encourage you to re-engineer Covid-19 relief funding to be void of any unfair criteria.

Wakkerstroom is a small rural town that has an agricultural and tourism based economy. Many of these enterprises do not qualify for relief funding given the current criteria. A worst-case scenario is that the majority of these enterprises will fail as a result of Covid-19, unemployment will rocket, residents will not even be able to feed themselves, and chaos will prevail.

I am sure that you and your government do not wish this as an outcome?

We strongly urge you to change all relief funding criteria to be fair and inclusive.

We would welcome further discussion about the matter.

**Jeff Lawrence**  
WTA Treasurer  
Wakkerstroom

■ THERE IS ANOTHER PART TO THIS THAT NO-ONE seems to have mentioned: When the virus hit Wuhan and they shut the whole of China down, every foreigner in the country, by their 10s of thousands, rushed back to their home countries. Repatriation flights were ten-a-dozen.

Which was okay because all the factories were shut down. So China didn't have to house, feed, medically care for and financially help them.

But now all the factories in China are open again. And all the jobs and work opportunities in China are back again. But ... and how about this? ... China's international borders remain closed and no foreigners are being allowed back in!

So who are all those jobs, that are back now, going to?... Chinese workers! Whose workers now have more jobs than they know what to do with.... China's workers. What country now has enough jobs for everybody so there is zero unemployment and zero people needing government help for food and money? China!

**Thane Smith**  
By email

You should enjoy our story on page 24. – Ed. ■

# noseweek

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## Editorial

# Cyril's scary China deal: are we that desperate?

**W**HEN JACOB ZUMA FELL FROM power, the Guptas and their Indian bankers were allowed to flee the country unhindered. The government and state-owned enterprises are now – so they declare – moving to recover the massive sums they lost as a result of the activities of the Guptas and their collaborators. President Cyril Ramaphosa and his Minister of Public Enterprises Pravin Gordhan have gained much of their credibility from their apparent commitment to the project.

But, if it ever was seriously the intention of the Ramaphosa government to go after the Guptas and their collaborators, more recent events suggest they may have lost their enthusiasm for the cause.

In August last year *The Sunday Independent* reported that Johannesburg law firm Werksmans Attorneys had been paid R300 million between February 2016 and April 2019 by the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa) for forensic services, despite the Auditor-General having flagged the law firm's contract as irregular. Ironic, since former Prasa Group CEO Nkosinathi Khena had appointed Werksmans in August 2015 to investigate 141 contracts above R10m, after the A-G's 2014/2015 report found that R550m in contracts awarded during the tenure of the Gupta-endorsed former CEO Lucky Montana, were irregular.

The affected companies to be investigated by the lawyers included Swifambo Rail Leasing Pty Ltd, awarded the multi-billion too-large-to-travel locomotive supply tender, Siyangena Technologies and Mazwe Investments Pty Ltd.

In an "intervening witness affidavit" filed in the high court, Pretoria, in April last year in the case between Prasa and Siyangena Technologies, Montana claimed the appointment of Werksmans was "a fraudulent act" by the board's audit and risk committee chairperson, Ms Zodwa Manase.

Manase denied this. "No individual non-executive director has the power to unilaterally appoint any supplier. As the chairperson of the audit risk committee, I firmly believe in and complied with governance, ethics and proper company policies," she told *The Sunday Independent*.

So, too, did Werksmans director Bernard Hotz: "The appointment of

Werksmans was entirely lawful. It was found to be lawful by a court of law."

"The board appointed Werksmans to do a deeper investigation into the findings of the A-G," Prasa spokesperson Nana Zenani told *The Sunday Independent*.

Right or wrong, the controversy appears to have made Prasa lose enthusiasm both for the project – and for paying Werksmans's bills.

In January, just days before Prasa was to file critical papers at the North Gauteng High Court, the law firm and the senior advocates it had briefed withdrew as its legal representatives because of Prasa's failure to pay a R19m fee bill that had been outstanding for six months.

In a letter to the Administrator of Prasa, Werksmans chairman David Hertz wrote: "The disastrous result will be that the Siyangena matter will not proceed on an opposed basis... [and] Prasa's application will, in all likelihood, be dismissed by default.

"Ultimately, Prasa will be called upon to pay over R6 billion to the very persons and entities identified as key role players in the corruption frenzy at Prasa which was highlighted [in the] investigations which precipitated Prasa taking this matter to court."

Prasa has subsequently paid the outstanding bill, and Werksmans and counsel have returned to the case, now postponed to a future date for hearing.

You will see that our Transnet story on page 12 has a similar, ongoing theme.

We all know these attempts to recover "Gupta" loot are made more difficult by the continuing threat posed by hostile, still-powerful factions within the ANC. Less widely known is the legal threat posed by the fact that senior government and SOE executives – from Zuma, all the way down, actively collaborated and shared in the plunder.

Our law has inherited a general principle, still applied by our courts, from early Roman law, hence it is still often referred to by its Latin phrasing: *In pari delicto potior est conditio defendentis* – A plaintiff who has participated in wrongdoing cannot recover damages resulting from the wrongdoing.

Are the circumstances of the Guptas' capture of the state so extraordinary that they allow our courts to take a different view?

Our cover image portrays Minister

of Public Enterprises Pravin Gordhan facing this dilemma, not in his personal capacity, but in his official capacity as minister responsible for Transnet and a senior representative of the ANC.

So much for our debts from the past. What of the future? Even before the dawn of Corona, the signs were disappointingly bad, as so well articulated by Sam Sole in the accompanying guest editorial. amaBhungane has *Noseweek's* wholehearted support for this big undertaking.

In case readers doubt the seriousness of the cause, consider this: the Limpopo project will provide an African export opportunity for China's out-of-date, out-of-work electricity-from-coal industry, and an out-of-China venue for some of its dirtiest polluters: its metals-smelting industries that we will be stuck with for a century.

Note here that on the same day lockdown was declared by Ramaphosa, Minister of Environment Barbara Creecy promulgated new so-called anti-pollution regulations – which double the pollution levels previously allowed! A requirement of that China deal? Why else make such a retrogressive move without explanation?

As standard practice, the labour to construct and run the multiple power stations and smelters (tax free) will be Chinese. For us to repay this debt we will be committed to letting them export the metals they produce duty-free to China at a price set by them.

We haven't even got to the scale of the water crisis yet that they are about to precipitate for the northern provinces, game reserves and Mozambique.

President Ramaphosa personally signed the deal on his visit to China in October last year. Was this recklessness a measure of the government's desperation? Otherwise, as Tanzania's new president John Magufuli has declared: "Only a drunken man would have signed such a deal." (He's cancelled theirs.)

● Jack Lundin suggested readers might like a bit of light relief from all the present-day shock-horror, so see page 25 for his bitter-sweet memoir of days in a bizarre Rhodesian bush school in the 1950s.

In a similar vein, our guest columnist from New York, Ronald Wohlman shares some hilarious entries from his Covid lockdown diary.

We will survive! – **The Editor.**

# Earth Crimes

**N**EVER LET A CRISIS GO TO WASTE.

That may seem heartless, but the Covid-19 pandemic is both a warning and an opportunity.

It is a warning that the world is interconnected in ways that we cannot unravel.

We cannot insulate ourselves from the global threats that are a consequence of the fact that we ourselves are a virus, too lazy and selfish to see that we are destroying our host, the planetary ecosystems on which we depend to survive.

Globalisation has arguably lifted millions out of poverty, but it has also produced unprecedented global fragilities as humanity has remorselessly encroached on and debased the natural world.

The Coronavirus outbreak is just one symptom of that encroachment – but the global climate crisis remains.

It is rapidly escalating and is likely to trigger secondary crises of increasing severity.

Someone on my timeline recently said his daughter asked him if, growing up, she would ever have the benefit of living in a time without crisis. There's a terrible truth in that question: as things stand we are bequeathing our children a world of continual and worsening environmental and social dislocation.

So, in the midst of one crisis, amaBhungane is focussing on another: #EarthCrimes.

It is our attempt to blow the whistle on the companies, policies, politicians and people who are helping to wreck the planet.

In our launch exposé, we show how the government's plan for a giant

Chinese-run, coal-fuelled mineral processing zone at Makhado, near the Beitbridge border crossing, is fronted by a man branded a crook by co-directors in one of his companies. A London high court judge threw out his civil challenge to such allegations because he lacked candour.

That is just the start of the deep flaws of this absurdly ambitious project that purports to give the Ramaphosa administration a foreign investment coup to crow about.

One might think the Covid-19 crisis would put paid to such dirty industrial fantasies that really belong in the last century.

Think again.

To stimulate its domestic economy following the Covid-19 pandemic, China has surged its new coal plant permitting. In March, China permitted more coal-fired capacity for construction than it did in all of 2019. This despite the fact that China has a huge energy surplus.

Similar pressures were on display on 27 March, the day our lockdown began, when our own minister of environment gazetted sulphur dioxide air pollution standards only half as stringent as the previous standards!

So, while the global industrial shutdown enforced by the pandemic has temporarily produced clearer skies and cleaner water, it may not necessarily produce the kind of deep economic and industrial reboot that the planet needs. That requires a global shift in thinking.

Indications are that the pandemic will force us to confront the kind of changes needed to keep the planet from warming above the dangerous levels it has reached already.

Firstly, it has put paid to growth.

Realistically assessed, we are headed for a great depression that might outstrip the economic implosion of the 1930s.

For the planet, that might be just what the doctor ordered.

All the evidence on climate change suggests we can have a liveable planet or we can pursue unchecked growth, but we can't have both.

Up to now, that has been an unpalatable political choice.

As Simon Kuper wrote in the *Financial Times* in October 2019: "A long economic depression might be enough to keep the planet habitable... [But] we are not

going to find out. No electorate will vote to decimate its own lifestyle. We can't blame bad politicians or corporates. It's us: we will always choose growth over climate."

Now the virus is likely to enforce that outcome – at least for a time – without our having to make the initial hard political choices.

It is said that greenhouse gas emissions could easily drop by 5% or more this year as a result of the pandemic.

The second potential impact is to force us to restructure our societies to deal with the economic fallout.

What the pandemic has shown is that it is the social floor that counts, not the ceiling.

Without a proper social contract, without a broad socio-economic safety net – healthcare, shelter, education, information – societies are not able to contain and manage a crisis like this pandemic.

Covid-19 has the potential to force politicians and economists to address the current skewed balance between the individual freedom to accumulate and consume, versus the collective responsibility to protect, conserve and share.

If it does that, it will make a major contribution to meeting global climate goals.

But those positive outcomes are by no means assured.

It is not coincidental that the Great Depression was followed by a period of fascism and war.

The ability of political parties and governments to act as instruments of social cohesion and redistribution, rather than merely in the interests of elites, has been undermined by the influence of money in politics and a rise in disaffection, nihilism and populism.

Social consensus seeking has been made more difficult by the crumbling of the global news ecosystem – just as ubiquitous social media has atomised audiences and created systems that enable propaganda, emotivism and self-reinforcing silos.

At the heart of our crisis, is a failure to have a politics that accounts to citizens, instead of to elites, factions and self-interest.

amaBhungane was formed to expose and attack that failure. – **Sam Sole from amaBhungane** ■



# Limpopo's dirty great white elephant

**Government's plan to develop a R40-billion Chinese-controlled energy and metallurgical industrial complex at the Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone is dicey, however you look at it**

**T**HE DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND industry (DTI) outsourced the development and management of a coal-burning, water-guzzling, capital-soaking heavy industrial zone in Limpopo to an obscure Hong Kong-based businessman, Yat Hoi Ning, who was removed as chief executive of his previous company amid allegations of misconduct and fraud.

This despite there being publicly available information on the allegations against Ning and his associates, despite no feasibility study being done on the project, and despite the environmental pre-feasibility study identifying critical environmental issues such as the project's high water requirements in a water-scarce area.

Despite all that, the Ramaphosa administration – including Environment, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Barbara Creecy and the Limpopo government – are persisting with this scheme which entails handing over control of a large patch of South African soil for 90 years – and control of a project that will have a major impact on all aspects of our economy.

The DTI abandoned prudent planning, assessment and feasibility protocols; instead they have taken a “pet project” approach, driven by opaque and unaccounted-for private and geopolitical interests.

This Chinese project is part of the problem, not the solution.

## Part 1: THE OPERATOR

**O**n 15 September 2017 then minister of trade and industry Rob Davies signed a “special economic zone operator permit” appointing a company called South African Energy Metallurgical Base (SAEMB) to “develop, operate and manage” the Energy and Metallurgical Special Economic Zone (SEZ) as part of the larger Musina-Makhado SEZ.

There are serious questions about the process and due diligence that led to that signature and the project's continuance.

The directors of the company that was granted the permit were Yat Hoi Ning (aka Yihai Ning) and Chuanhua “Frank” Shang.

Ning received his bachelor's degree from the mainland South China University of Technology in 1980. His company biography says he has more than 20 years' experience in non-ferrous and precious metals trading, investment and management.

Shang is said to be a former attaché of the Chinese embassy in South Africa, but associates say he became the go-to guy for Chinese businessmen seeking a foothold in South Africa. His official biography says he obtained a bachelor of electronic engineering in 1987 from the University of Shandong, China. He worked for the state-owned China National Export Bases Development Corp for 14 years as a director of new ventures in African mining and resources.

SAEMB, the company awarded the operator permit, is said to be a 100% subsidiary of the Chinese mainland-based Shenzhen Hoimor Resources Holding Company, but amaBhungane has not been able to find a trace of this company.

On the date Davies signed the permit there was good reason for the minister to withhold his approval pending a proper due diligence as to the fitness of Ning and Shang.

Both men were associated with a London-listed company with small mining holdings in Southern Africa called ASA Resource Group (formerly known as Mwana Africa). Ning was the executive chair and Shang was a shareholder.

On 18 April 2017, five months before the minister's decision, it was reported via official company announcements

that the ASA board had removed Ning and financial director Yim Kwan over alleged financial mismanagement.

The company put out a statement explaining “there is strong evidence of funds amounting to several million US dollars being transferred from the accounts... to entities in China, without full value being received.”

The same Kwan had on 15 June 2015 written to Davies on behalf of Mwana Africa, stating: “Mwana Africa Plc is interested in the planned South Africa Energy Metallurgical Industry Special Economic Zone after its designation as an SEZ...”

“To this end, we are willing to share the related information and our position with your department in terms of the project preliminary work which includes the project feasibility study materials, project cooperation plans and project programme, as well as the project implementation programme.”

That letter was a word-for-word copy of a letter sent to Davies four days earlier by Ning on behalf of another company, the Hong Kong Mining Exchange Company.

Clearly the minister or his officials were not paying attention because there was also media reporting on the ASA scandal.

In April 2017, Zimbabwe's *The Sunday Mail* reported that “more than US\$15 million could have been spirited away”.

On 29 July 2017 ASA shares were suspended pending “financial clarification”. Two days later the high court in London appointed administrators to take over the running of ASA and on 4 September 2017 (ten days before Davies's decision) the Mashonaland Central magistrate issued an arrest warrant for the financial director, Kwan.

Davies ought to have been informed that the leading figure behind SAEMB (the SEZ operator



he was appointing) was implicated in allegations of fraud that had led to his removal from the board of a London-listed company, that the same company had been suspended and placed under administration and that its finance director was a fugitive from justice.

Some additional due diligence for a project as large as this might have revealed that:

Shang (Ning's co-director in SAEMB) and a South African, Briss Mathabathe, were involved in the Chinese venture to buy into Profert, the South African fertilizer producer, an initiative that ended in tears and business rescue.

Shang and Mathabathe were also involved in the abortive Super 5 Media initiative which involved an attempt at setting up a Telkom-linked competitor for Mnet, but which resulted in collapse and losses both for Telkom and a Chinese investor.

Davies told us he was unaware of any untoward associations around Ning prior to signing off on the operator licence: "Nothing was drawn to my attention." He said he acted on the advice of the SEZ advisory board, his officials and the Limpopo Economic Development Agency, which was the project "sponsor".

Subsequent to the formal announcement in September 2017, there were more opportunities for the minister and the department to reassess the appropriateness of SAEMB and Ning.

On 27 December 2017 the Zimbabwe's *Herald* newspaper reported that Zimbabwean authorities had issued arrest warrants for both Kwan and Ning.

On 10 May 2018 the *Financial Mail* carried a detailed exposé on some of the preliminary allegations directed at Ning and his associates.

It quoted DTI spokesperson Sidwell Medupi as saying they would investigate and, "If any evidence of wrongdoing emerges, the department will deal with such matters expeditiously".

It also quoted Ning saying he "strenuously" denied ASA's allegations. "Our removal as directors of ASA was unlawful and I am currently bringing a claim in the high court of justice [in London] concerning my unlawful removal as a director and other matters," he said.

Davies was aware of at least some



# #earth crimes

of these developments. He told amaBhungane: "At a subsequent stage the department informed me the individual [Ning] appeared on something called an Interpol Red Notice... We wrote to the individual and said if this is the case, the DTL... was not able to go ahead with supporting this project until these outstanding issues were sorted out."

Davies said Ning claimed the Red Notice was a scam and that he would clear his name.

Ning's name does not appear on Interpol's current list and Zimbabwean sources said that since 2017 he had re-ingratiated himself with the Harare regime.

However, in the UK, a court application brought by Ning to have the case against him set aside failed. In a judgment issued on 29 November 2018 the London high court noted that the case against him was based on substantial grounds that included "stealing money, a corrupt relationship between Mr Ning and the Chinese suppliers and... conspiracy between the Chinese directors".

Ning had been required to make disclosure of documents in his possession. Shortcomings in his disclosures led the court to conclude that they were "not consistent with a bona fide attempt to comply with the terms of the... order."

Davies's successor, trade and industry minister Ebrahim Patel, did not bother to respond to written questions from amaBhungane, even though his officials had weeks to do so.

Neither Ning nor Shang replied to email or WhatsApp messages.

— Sam Sole and the amaBhungane team

● This is the first of a four-part series. You will find them, with source references, online at:

[www.amabhungane.org](http://www.amabhungane.org) ■

## 'Only a drunk man could have signed'

TANZANIA PRESIDENT JOHN Magufuli has cancelled a Chinese loan worth \$10 billion signed by his predecessor Jakaya Kikwete to construct a port in his country.

The project, which broke ground four years ago and was set to be run by China Merchants Holding International, would have been the largest port in East Africa.

Magufuli said that the terms of the Chinese loan agreement could "...only be accepted by a drunken man".

His predecessor, President Kikwete signed the deal with Chinese investors to build the port on condition that they would get a 30-years guarantee on the loan and a 99-year uninterrupted lease, according to local media reports.

Another shocking demand made by the Chinese and accepted by Kikwete administration was that the Tanzanian government will have absolutely no power to raise concerns on whoever invests in the port during that period.

Dubbed as the "killer Chinese loan", several organisations and African citizens had demanded the then President should cancel the agreement.

They had warned that the deal will have dire consequences but their concerns were overlooked and the deal was signed. — as reported on April 24, 2020 by [PortlandTerminal.com](http://PortlandTerminal.com) ■

# Notes & Updates

## Spar vs Spar

**T**HE POSTPONEMENT OF THE *SPAR vs Spar* court case in the High Court in Pietermaritzburg has not prevented a well-placed whistleblower from coming forward with shocking information about the food retail giant's leadership. The information he supplied rang a bell because two owners of Spar stores had made similar claims about the conduct of the Spar Group's CEO, Graham O'Connor.

"I am by no means a disgruntled employee; in fact the contrary is true," our whistleblower tells *Noseweek*. "I am however, along with several other stakeholders (employees as well as Spar store owners), extremely frustrated and concerned about the apparent lack of ethical leader-

ship that currently prevails in the company."

### **JOBS FOR PALS**

He said that since O'Connor was appointed to the position sometime in 2014, he has treated the Spar organisation as if it were his own family business, notwithstanding the fact that Spar is a large and prosperous public company listed on the JSE.

Declares the whistleblower: "It would appear that the Board of Directors as well as the Executive Committee have meekly looked on or turned a blind eye to what in most companies would be considered unacceptable conflicts of interest and even, in some cases, transgressions of the law. I don't condone, but do under-

stand this meek attitude, as O'Connor is seen to be a ruthless man who deals very harshly with those who stand in his way."

Our source – *Noseweek* will refer to him as "Mr X" – supplied a list of examples of questionable actions that have taken place under O'Connor's Spar leadership, stating that these have either been for his personal benefit or for the benefit of his family and friends. It includes O'Connor's numerous appointments of personal friends to senior Spar positions.

Laurence Balcomb, allegedly a family friend of O'Connor and previously the managing director of Clientèle Ltd, was appointed to the position of Financial Executive South Africa, a new position on Spar's execu-



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tive committee. Previously the post did not exist and was created by O'Connor.

"The position was never advertised nor was it discussed at executive level and the first the executive committee knew of this new position, and the appointment, was when Laurence arrived at his first committee meeting," claims Mr X.

Another two alleged family friends of O'Connor, Scott Forest and James Crookes, were appointed in senior positions while the people who had previously held the posts were demoted, only to be reinstated later when Forest fell out of favour and Crookes died.

### MANDATE MEALS

At the time of his Spar employment, O'Connor was and still is the owner of Mandate Meals, which is a large Durban-based catering company specialising in the running of large company canteens. Mandate Meals at the time had obtained the contract for staff canteens at some of Spar's distribution centres. Mr X says O'Connor, after his appointment, allegedly used his position to muscle Mandate Meals into the remaining distribution centres, thereby taking over the entire canteen service of Spar, which caters for a staff of around 7,500 people.

The catering company that had previously serviced Spar's Western Cape distribution centre allegedly lodged a complaint to the Spar board regarding the process that had been followed when its contract was cancelled. "But this complaint was swiftly swept under the carpet," says Mr X.

### AMAZULU FOOTBALL CLUB

Spar sponsors the Durban based AmaZulu Football Club. Usually this would appear to be nothing out of the ordinary as large companies do sponsor sports teams and AmaZulu does play in the Premiership League. However, Spar has a particular strategy of only supporting women's sport, which has added great value at club, provincial and national levels over the years, according to Mr X.

"I have it on excellent authority that the cost of the AmaZulu sponsorship far exceeds that of any of our other

## Giannacopoulos case postponed

The Giannacopoulos court case against the Spar Group Ltd, due to have started in the High Court in Pietermaritzburg on 13 March, has been postponed until late May.

Spar has been trying to halt the business activities of the Giannacopoulos family's more than 40 independently owned Spar stores since last year, an action the family

says is invalid and which should be set aside or suspended by the court pending the outcome of a complaint to the competition authorities. The family is also asking the court to decide whether it was lawful, constitutional and valid for the Spar Group to have unilaterally changed the family's credit terms from 30 days to seven days for some standard products. ■

sponsorships. This is astounding, when you consider that Spar are also the sponsors of the South African netball team, ranked in the top four in the world."

*Noseweek* has established that Spar's sponsorship of AmaZulu is around R10 million per year and that its sponsorship of the national women's netball team has been around R35m over the past four years.

"The real conflict here is that O'Connor is not only the CEO of Spar but also the Managing Director of AmaZulu. In essence he is directing Spar shareholder funds to a club where he has a vested interest," claims Mr X. "This is a source of great discontent among many in Spar and is seen to be blatantly dishonest."

In 2017, after being relegated following yet another dismal season, AmaZulu reinstated their premier league status by acquiring Thanda Royal Football Club for around R45m. Mr X says it is widely accepted that Spar footed the bill.

In July 2018, *Kick Off* magazine reported that Spar's financial support helped AmaZulu buy their way back into the top league with the purchase of the now-defunct Thanda Royal Zulu's status.

"Well, indirectly this did happen," says one of *Noseweek's* other sources. "The deal was facilitated with a loan from Grindrod Bank; Spar's sponsorship of R10m per year was recorded as surety for the loan."

What makes this whole matter more questionable is that the Chairman of Spar's Board of Directors, Mike Hankinson, is also the Chairman of Grindrod Ltd.

"It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul,"

explains our source. "Ultimately the consumer pays."

### RETIREMENT

Mr X says that according to Spar's company policy O'Connor was obliged to take retirement when he turned 63 in August last year, yet he has continued to remain employed although no formal explanation has been supplied to Spar employees. "This is highly frustrating to many employees who are still being required to retire, some in no financial state to do so, at age 63."

In response to *Noseweek's* emails and questions, Mandy Hogan, Spar Group's company secretary replied saying O'Connor did not wish to comment.

Grindrod's company secretary, Cathie Lewis, did not supply contact details for Hankinson after being told why *Noseweek* wanted to send him questions. – Susan Puren ■





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# The money train

## Transnet in court battle with liquidators of Gupta-linked audit firm over R57m in 'corrupt' payments and invoices

**T**RANSNET IS KEEPING ITS FOOT ON the pedal in its campaign to recover billions of rand lost to corruption when state capture forces defrauded the state-owned logistics company.

One of those Transnet recovery projects is a battle to get back R57 million in alleged fraudulent payments and invoices, related to "non-audit services", from the liquidators of the estate of Gupta-controlled accounting and audit firm Nkonki Sizwe Ntsaluba (Nkonki Inc). The company went into liquidation following the departure of the Guptas from South Africa and the exposure of their state capture schemes.

Before Nkonki was taken over by state capture forces, it was an independent black-owned auditing and accounting firm with a history dating back to 1990. In 1996, the company merged with another black firm of accountants to form Nkonki Sizwe Ntsaluba.



Mitesh Patel

In September last year, in court papers lodged in the South Gauteng High Court in Johannesburg, Transnet applied for the review and setting aside of a decision made by allegedly corrupt senior Transnet executives in 2017 to procure "non-audit" services from Nkonki for massive fees.

Then in December last year, Transnet followed up with a summons against the estate of Nkonki and its joint liquidators. The purpose of the summons is partly to counter the Nkonki liquidators' demand that Transnet must still pay R19m in outstanding Nkonki bills.

In addition to countering this claim, Transnet also wants to recover R38m it had already paid to Nkonki that it allegedly shouldn't have paid, bringing the total amount of the claim to R57m.

A successful ruling in the matter lodged in September to set aside the procurement of the "non-audit" services will strengthen Transnet's hand in the claim.

Transnet spokesperson Nompumelelo Kunene said that the Nkonki liquidators have not yet filed a response to Transnet's summons, since an agreement was reached between the parties to put the litigation on hold pending the outcome of settlement negotiations.

The whole matter of the downfall of Nkonki stems from the involvement of the Gupta brothers and their associates in the company. The Indian brothers used financial incentives to cultivate a network of key people in the South African government, state owned enterprises and the ANC, especially under former president Jacob Zuma, in order to gain substantial business and facilitate theft from state enterprises.

When Zuma fell from power, the Guptas fled the country. The government and state owned enterprises

are now attempting to recover some of the massive losses they incurred as a result of the corrupt activities of the Guptas and their collaborators. Nkonki is a case in point. (See editorial.)

Transnet's relationship with Nkonki started in August 2013 when the state logistics utility entered into a joint five-year internal auditing contract with Nkonki, KPMG and SekelaXabiso (SkX). When this contract was awarded its estimated worth was put at R1.3 billion.

However, three years later, from October 2016 to January 2017, a dark shadow was cast over Nkonki when it was taken over by Gupta-linked forces. At that time managing director of Nkonki, Mitesh Patel, through funding supplied by Gupta-linked Centaur Ventures, acquired a majority shareholding in the firm on behalf of Salim Essa's Trillian Management and Consultancy, which was also a Gupta entity, for R107m, according to investigative unit amaBhungane.

In terms of their original contract, Nkonki was required to let Transnet know of any change to its controlling shareholding, and if it failed to do so without prior written consent from Transnet, then the state company could cancel the contract.

Nkonki never notified Transnet of this change, and once Transnet discovered this infringement, Nkonki lost all its business with the state company. Too late.

Another point worth noting is that Patel was not a registered auditor, according to amaBhungane. Following the transfer, the majority shareholding of Nkonki was held by those who were not registered auditors, resulting in the firm being in contravention of the Auditing Professions Act and operating illegally.

Considering this fact, one might justifiably ask why Transnet is not claiming all monies it paid Nkonki from the time that ownership of Nkonki changed in late 2016 and early 2017 and not just the "non-audit" work. [Perhaps Nkonki, now insolvent and in liquidation, doesn't have the money to repay? – Ed.]

Returning to the story, almost immediately after the Trillian takeover of Nkonki was completed, in January 2017, Nkonki submitted two separate unsolicited bids/proposals to Transnet for so-called "non-audit" work.

The first unsolicited bid was entitled: "Cost savings and efficiency proposals" while the second unsolicited bid was entitled: "Transnet Freight Rail coal contract enhancement initiative".

The new Nkonki owners and the existing Transnet top management at the time allegedly colluded to hatch a plan to defraud the state company of up to R500m in funds through needless Nkonki "non-audit" work.

In addition, key managers at Transnet allegedly pulled the wool over the eyes of the members of two key committees of the board, who approved this work despite questions being raised about this "non-audit" work's potential conflicts with the internal audit work that Nkonki was doing at Transnet.

However, later down the line, it appears then Transnet CEO Siyabonga Gama got cold feet about this "non-audit" work amid increased scrutiny of state and Transnet procurement practices when the days of the Gupta influence had started to wane.

So Transnet reduced the maximum procurement cap for this "non-audit" work from R500m to R95m and, ultimately, R57m was billed.

Nevertheless, the whole procurement process involved with this work broke numerous laws and regulations. Transnet said in court papers that the Nkonki agreement for "non-audit" work was "unlawful and tainted by misrepresentation, statutory non-compliance and collusion".

The decision to procure "non-audit" work from Nkonki was inconsistent with the provisions of Section 217 of the Constitution of South Africa, the requirements of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and Transnet's procurement procedures

manual, Transnet added.

Transnet also raised the issue of Nkonki's not having had a written agreement for the "non-audit" work, which was also in contravention of various laws and regulations.

In addition, Nkonki provided no evaluation reports for the "non-audit" work, as it was required to do, so failing to provide any evidence that it had delivered a service of value to Transnet.

Mohammed Mahomedy, who was then acting Group CEO of Transnet, in court papers filed in September last year, characterised the situation as follows: "As a result of these unlawful acts of state capture, illegal contracts were purportedly concluded on behalf of Transnet with [Nkonki]."

## **Nkonki never notified Transnet of this change, and once they discovered this infringement, Nkonki lost all its business with the state**

Transnet's former executives embezzled the group's financial resources by paying Nkonki for "improperly procured" services, and for which the state company "did not receive value for money", Mahomedy added.

Nkonki had claimed in its proposal that it could save Transnet between R1bn and R2.5bn with its cost-saving strategies over three years. However, Mahomedy, who left Transnet in March, wrote in his affidavit that Nkonki achieved no savings.

"Through [Nkonki], Essa was able to infiltrate and fleece Transnet under the guise of a reputable audit firm with whom Transnet had an existing commercial relationship," according to Mahomedy.

In April 2018, Nkonki started to disintegrate as the company's fraud-



**Salim Essa**



**Stanley Shane**



**Siyabonga Gama**



**Edward Thomas**

ulent existence was revealed. On April 18, 2018, the Auditor General announced that it had halted its contract with Nkonki because of the revelations that the company was involved in state capture. Days later on April 24, Nkonki started proceedings for the voluntary liquidation of its Sunninghill operation in Johannesburg and 180 people at the company lost their jobs.

Then on May 2 of that year, Transnet terminated its key contract with Nkonki as a result of the auditing company's failure to disclose the fact that Salim Essa's Trillian bought Nkonki's controlling shareholding without this being revealed to Transnet.

Some weeks later, on June 26, the Master of the High Court appointed the joint Nkonki liquidators. They are

Reuben Miller of RMG Trust, Norman Klein of Westrust, Aigle Finance director Vimbai Tsopotsa and Refilwe Tlhabanyane.

In the court papers, Mahomedy and Transnet pointed out the top Transnet managers who were instrumental in giving Nkonki Inc extra work and described what happened to them once their actions were exposed.

Then Transnet supply chain manager Edward Thomas and former Transnet chief executive Siyabonga Gama made misrepresentations to both Transnet's audit committee and its acquisitions and disposal committee, Transnet stated in its submission.

Thomas and Gama knew that their representations were false and significantly so and they also knew that they were acting in Nkonki's interests rather than that of Transnet, Transnet stated.

Thomas' submission regarding Nkonki's unsolicited bids was approved by Gama, as well as by Transnet's then chief audit executive Mmathabo Sukati and by Gary Pita, who was then Transnet's chief financial officer.

Gama, Thomas and Pita were all implicated in allegations of state capture at Transnet and had either resigned in the face of disciplinary proceedings instituted by Transnet, or Transnet had dismissed them, Mahomedy wrote in court papers.

According to Mahomedy's affidavit, Sukati confirmed that the unsolicited bids did not arise from any business need or gap analysis done by Transnet to justify procurement of "non-audit

services" from Nkonki.

Sukati also raised the question of a real conflict of interest arising from Nkonki's unsolicited bids. She expressly questioned how Nkonki would objectively execute its audit functions while at the same time performing "non-audit services".

The minutes of the meeting recorded that Transnet's then chief legal officer Ndiphiwe Silinga did raise a concern with how the unsolicited proposals were approved, Mahomedy added in the court papers.

On 31 October 2018, Transnet suspended Thomas following probes into misconduct involving consultants, including Regiments Capital, Trillian Advisory Services, Trillian Capital Partners and Nkonki. Following the internal investigation into the allegations, Transnet instituted disciplinary action against Thomas in November 2018, charging him with four counts of gross misconduct. One of the charges pertained directly to the abuse of the Transnet procurement processes in the appointment of Nkonki for one of the two "non-audit" contracts.

Also, Transnet instituted civil proceedings against Thomas for R11.4m paid to Trillian for work not done or completed. The aim was to recover fruitless and wasteful expenditure incurred by Transnet from Thomas, Mahomedy wrote in his affidavit.

Thomas was dismissed on 2 October last year, after a disciplinary process, the *Daily Maverick* reported.

Thomas has challenged steps taken against him by Transnet in the Labour Court, and these proceedings



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were ongoing, Mahomedy stated in his affidavit.

Pita not only played a central role in the process leading to the approval of Nkonki's "non-audit services" unsolicited bid but he also authorised R179m in payments to Trillian in a manner that was unlawful and without work being provided by Trillian to Transnet, Mahomedy stated.

In early 2018, Transnet took disciplinary steps against Pita due to his involvement in the recommendation and support of Nkonki unsolicited bids inconsistent with Transnet's procurement obligations.

## This is evident in the approval and implementation of [Nkonki's] unsolicited bid proposals

The disciplinary steps also followed Pita's authorisation of the payment of about R40m to Trillian in June 2016 when he ought to have known that Trillian did not provide any billable work to Transnet to justify the payment, according to Mahomedy's affidavit.

Transnet suffered losses and instituted civil proceedings against Pita to recover wasteful expenditure, Mahomedy wrote.

In April 2018, Pita resigned as Transnet chief financial officer, according to a News24 article. Since May 2018, he has been a business consultant, according to his LinkedIn profile.

Transnet has instituted civil proceedings against Gama for the recovery of wasteful expenditure due to overpayments made by Transnet to Regiments Capital and Trillian of R323.7m.

Transnet fired Gama in October 2018. *Business Day* reported that one of the key reasons why Transnet fired him was due to probes that

implicated him in maladministration in the acquisition of locomotives worth R54bn from General Electric, Bombardier Transport, China South Rail and China North Rail in 2012.

Mahomedy stated in his affidavit that there was a discernible pattern concerning Thomas, Pita, Gama and Stanley Shane, chairman of Transnet's acquisition and disposal committee, that showed that they conspired among themselves and facilitated the Nkonki transaction, as well as having siphoned off money to other Gupta companies and fronts.

"This is evident in the approval and implementation of [Nkonki's] unsolicited bid proposals," he wrote.

*Noseweek* contacted Gama's lawyer Brian Kahn and sent him a list of questions for his client. In response, Kahn said that Gama was "not at liberty - nor is he inclined - to respond to your questions". In addition, Gama also declined to comment because the matters were sub judice.

Pita was contacted for comment and questions were sent to the email address that he provided. His response: "I am advised that due to the fact that various court actions are currently pending, these issues are sub judice and I cannot respond to [Noseweek's] questions at this stage."

*Noseweek* wasn't able to get in touch with either Thomas or Shane. A call to Thomas's old Transnet cell phone showed that it was no longer in use. Thomas's LinkedIn profile shows that since he was fired by Transnet in November last year, he has been working as a finance and supply chain management consultant.

The two numbers that *Noseweek* discovered through a trace search for Shane rang, but no one answered the calls.

Fascinating testimony included in Mahomedy's court papers concerns Transnet's "culture of intimidation" during the times of state capture. Transnet targeted employees who refused to carry out illegal orders, and in particular, Mahomedy said, his superiors bullied him when he refused to authorise payment to Trillian.

As a result, he was "subjected to unbearable acts of intimidation by my superiors".

As part of this, in September 2016, Thomas contacted Mahomedy and



Mohammed Mahomedy

requested that he attend an interview at PricewaterhouseCoopers's Sunninghill offices in Johannesburg. Thomas said that the interview was part of a probe to establish who at Transnet was leaking confidential information to the media, Mahomedy wrote.

At the interview, Transnet subjected Mahomedy to a voice analysis test, which was effectively a lie-detector test; handwriting analysis; and forensic interrogation over seven months. Transnet also made a copy of the entire contents of his computer and mobile equipment for examination.

Mahomedy said he considered his employment at Transnet "unbearable". In April 2017, he requested a voluntary separation package to exit the company, but Transnet management refused to let him leave. Instead, Pita told Mahomedy that the forensic team did not establish any evidence that implicated Mahomedy in any wrongdoing and that his services were still required.

Mahomedy said his testimony was "an elementary example" of how staff at Transnet were intimidated and subjected to "unjustified investigation".

"Simply because they were performing their functions and duties consistent with the procurement and governance processes of Transnet, and were not willing to do the bidding of the officials who were illicitly associated with acts of state capture," he wrote. — Justin Brown ■

*"Although we are apart now, we have been together the last 22 years"*



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## Arch on the march

**'We will overcome this and we'll realise we are a communion of nations more than we think,' says Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Dr Thabo Makgoba**

I AM SEATED IN A SPACIOUS, SUNNY boardroom at Bishops court, the official residence of the Anglican archbishops of Cape Town since 1851. At a safe distance, many metres away at the head of the table, is the Most Reverend Dr Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town.

It's Monday 23 March. Later in the day President Cyril Ramaphosa was to announce the 21-day lockdown starting in four days' time. The archbishop's office is already practising strict social distancing. He returned 14 days ago from London where, among others, he met with the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, principal leader of the Anglican Church worldwide.

"I'm praying that we'll learn solidarity from this Coronavirus, that we'll start talking about common humanity and how we do it in practice," says Dr Makgoba. He sees this time as a turning point for humanity.

Driving down the tree-lined driveway to the estate, in the heart of one of South Africa's richest suburbs, one could not but be reminded of the history of the place. Originally comprising 213 acres (86 hectares), it was given to Jan van Riebeeck, first commander of the Dutch garrison at the Cape by the Dutch East India Company more than 350 years ago, but the house burned down before he could occupy it.

It was rebuilt by Sir Herbert Baker at the turn of the 19th Century. Today the grounds span 16 acres (nearly 6.5ha). It was in this Bishops court house where Nelson Mandela spent his first night of freedom as a guest of then Archbishop

Desmond Tutu and his wife Leah.

The boardroom wall is covered with stately portraits of Makgoba's predecessors, bedecked in their robes of office: there's Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane (a former prisoner on Robben Island, he was Archbishop from 1996 to 2007); Archbishop



Archbishop of Cape Town, Dr Thabo Makgoba

Desmond Tutu (1986-1996) and, before them, Archbishops Philip Russell, Bill Burnett, and Robert Selby Taylor. The archbishops of Cape Town go all the way back to Robert Gray, the first bishop of Cape Town, who purchased

Bishops court in 1851.

It feels strange interviewing somebody seated so many metres apart, but Makgoba, known – besides being politically outspoken – for his charm, engages easily about his personal history and his current challenges.

In the course of the interview, he talks about his origins in Limpopo; about what it was like speaking out against the Zuma regime; about being a twin – his beloved twin sister Nthabiseng, who was a big influence in his life, died some years back; and about his deep respect for Pope Francis, whom he has met three times. Among the books he is reading is Malcolm Gladwell's *Talking to Strangers*: "His main point is how often we humans get other people wrong, how we misunderstand each other – and that we all belong, or should belong."

He also chats about his passion for gardening in the grounds of Bishops court, where he lives with his wife Lungi, their son Nyakallo and daughter Paballo. Nyakallo is in his second year of a Master's degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and Paballo is doing a Humanities degree both at UCT.

Makgoba's current challenge is dealing with the impact of the Coronavirus on his vast number of parishioners. "You can cut the fear among the people," he says. He explains that he has more than 30 bishops, each of whom presides over between 40 and 120 parishes. "If we count the children and the unconfirmed, I have about 5 million parishioners."

He is technically the Archbishop of Cape Town and the "Metropolitan" of



the church across Southern Africa. That includes dioceses in South Africa, Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland and the island of St Helena.

Makgoba has never before presided over so many *Skype* and *Zoom* meetings, WhatsApp groups and website updatings with advisory teams of bishops, doctors, nutritionists and lawyers, as in recent days, to guide his parishes. The challenges range from the need for food and sanitation, to ministry.

Then there's the regular contact he keeps with retired archbishops Njongonkulu and Tutu. "I have to keep saying to them, 'Please don't be heroic, stay at home!' They are keen to get involved."

At present, Makgoba says, he is preoccupied with trying to instill hope and "to try and talk about that small strip of light that most of us can't see in darkness that eventually will overcome the darkness".

Even this period will come and go, he says. "But it needs a collective effort rather than fear, ignorance and forgetting to care and love one another. It's a case of hearing what the President is saying, what the Minister of Health is saying – and getting information from our bishops throughout South Africa and the other African countries.

"I have to ensure there is communication, coordination, discipline, love, respect of the law and of one another in almost the greater part of SADC."

There is also the constant possibility that churches might be called on to assist on the frontline. "We have to consider whether we should open our churches to be places of quarantine or places where people can be tested and treated if the health centres are oversubscribed. Or can we open our churches to be places of feeding if we run out of food. "We are starting to look at what the ministry might do in these unprecedented times."

Archbishop Makgoba describes himself as a natural introvert. "I could easily have been in a monastery just praying with the monks, but the good Lord had a sense of humour inviting me to be an arch, where most of my life and daily activities are with masses of people."

He has, for years, been involved with



Visiting the people

sometimes harrowing talks between mining companies and miners, a community very close to his heart. He became an outspoken critic of former president Jacob Zuma, after witnessing first-hand the effect of corruption on ordinary people's lives – often drawing the ire of ordinary citizens. He's remained a sharp critic of the Ramaphosa government, particularly on service delivery issues, the lack of which he witnesses regularly as he travels throughout South Africa.

But, he said, despite facing some big challenges, "I never, in my wildest dreams, thought I would face a situation like what we are facing with Covid-19.

"One can't deal with a virus in a tangible way, and it's moving so fast, mutating differently and the information coming out is fluid. It's changing every day and as such we have to hit the ground running, so this indeed is the greatest challenge I've had to deal with."

Makgoba's ancestral home is in Limpopo, in what his family calls Makgoba's Kloof (a distortion of the name Magoebaskloof), the beautiful part of South Africa's northernmost province which separates the Highveld from the Lowveld.

Makgoba's best-known ancestor is his great grandfather, Kgosi (King) Mamphoku Makgoba, who lived in the kloof in the late 1860s when the first whites arrived to look for gold. Kgosi Makgoba resisted the incursions by the ZAR government (Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek) which promulgated a law, the Occupation Act for State Land, which allocated land free to farmers provided they occupied it permanently and were willing to be conscripted for part-time duty as military commandos.

The government started applying forced removals in the 1890s and Kgosi Makgoba was killed in battle. According to some historical notes, a Boer farmer kept the skull of Kgosi Makgoba and would even occasionally drink whisky out of it.

The archbishop and his twin sister Nthabiseng were born in Tlhabine near Makgoba's Kloof in December 1960 and raised in Alexandra township in Johannesburg until the family was forcibly removed to Soweto when Thabo was 13. He matriculated from Orlando High School in Soweto.

Makgoba first became politically aware when another sister, Mataps, started attending black consciousness meetings in the late 1970s. He was baptised at St Michael's Church in

Alex and played an active role in the church as a teenager.

Initially torn between the attractions of a career in science or in the church, he studied for a BSc degree at Wits University, before going to St Paul's College in Grahamstown to study for the Anglican ministry. While in Grahamstown he met and later married Lungelwa Manona, the daughter of renowned academic Cecil Wele Manona.

He was subsequently awarded an MEd degree in Educational Psychology at Wits, where he lectured in the 1990s. He was ordained in 1990 and became Bishop of Queenstown (Suffragan Bishop of Grahamstown) in 2002 and then Bishop of Grahamstown in 2004. Before that, his ministry had been in the Diocese of Johannesburg, first as a curate at the cathedral and then as Wits' chaplain. He was subsequently put in charge of St Alban's Church and later of Christ the King, Sophiatown. He became Archdeacon of Sophiatown in 1999.

Makgoba became the youngest ever Archbishop of Cape Town in December 2007. He obtained a PhD degree from UCT in 2009. His thesis was on Workplace Spirituality.

Makgoba is currently the Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape (2012) and an Adjunct Professor at UCT's Allan Gray Centre for Values-

based Leadership, Graduate School of Business.

His awards include the Cross of St Augustine in 2008, the second-highest international award for outstanding service to the Anglican Communion. He also holds six honorary doctorates in divinity.

## He is also passionate about education and before going into full-time ministry, taught teachers at the JCE

In his memoir *Faith & Courage – Praying with Mandela*, Makgoba describes his relationship with Nelson Mandela in his last years, relates the history of the Makgoba clan as it lost its land to European settlers from the late 1880s, and recounts his path to become head of the Anglican church and a strong critic of government.

Mining and mining communities in South Africa and further afield are very close to his heart. His father, James Makgoba, as a self-supporting Zionist Christian Church (ZCC) pastor, used to work as a hawker selling clothes to mineworkers. "They would pay a deposit and at month end he would go and get money from them. I was raised by the miners money."

For his doctorate at UCT, Makgoba's thesis was: Workplace spirituality for spinal cord injured black miners. "I spent many hours at a hospital doing counselling with miners with spinal cord injuries. I've never seen such pain. They were all young – with severed spinal cords and zero prospects of having a child. That was the nature of their jobs. "Mining is part and parcel of the economy of Limpopo where I will retire to, so it's an area close to my heart."

Makgoba is also passionate about education. Before going into full-time ministry, he taught teachers at the Johannesburg College of Education. He has encouraged dioceses to open schools and, through the Archbishop's Development Trust, has raised money to build classrooms. "Education makes us bold as we challenge social ills," he says.

Also on his agenda are environmental issues, particularly when they highlight inequality. "For instance, mining companies give money to the government to rehabilitate the places they mine – which is seldom done, leaving gaping holes that affect the communities as well as the environment."

Makgoba takes inspiration from his two predecessors, archbishops Tutu and Njongonkulu, as well as from the writings of Beyers Naudé and from the messages of the Archbishop of Canterbury and The Pope, particularly their focus on the environment and the economy.

To this day, Tutu reminds Makgoba of how, as a much younger student activist in the Anglican church, he once stood up, overwhelmed at a meeting and accused Tutu and other elders of being "a bunch of old men, who are not even listening."

"These days, when we discuss really difficult issues, like same-sex unions, he chuckles and says, 'Come on you bunch of old men, make a decision!' It's not easy being in the hot seat!"



In a march to Parliament along with other clergy





**Addressing the press outside St Mary's Cathedral, Cape Town**

Njongonkulu, he says, is a meticulous reader of church law, who “reminds me to go back to what the rules say.”

Makgoba became a strong critic of Zuma after witnessing first-hand the lack of flushing toilets, classrooms, text books and basic human requirements on his extensive travels through South Africa.

In our interview, he described his horror at learning about the child who fell into the pit latrine and died at school, as well as a visit to an aunt outside Tzaneen where nothing had changed in her township, while in Polokwane there is a huge tenderpreneur village for the people working in government-linked businesses”.

Observing how corruption was stealing from the poorest of the poor, he took part in a range of protests to get rid of Zuma, including a 2017 silent protest with other faith-based leaders and civil society groups outside to call for Zuma’s resignation. He was also a key part of the South African Council of Churches’ (SACC’s) Unburdening Panel, set up in 2016 by the churches to offer all South Africans a safe space to unburden themselves of inappropriate deeds.

In its report after the process, the SACC said it found that South Africa could be “a few inches from the throes of a mafia state from which there may be no return, a recipe for a failed state”.

Then, at his midnight mass service at St George’s Cathedral on Christmas Eve last year, he told applauding parishioners he hoped 2020 would be “the year of the orange jump-suit” for corrupt officials.

He has also slammed President Ramaphosa and his Cabinet for numerous service delivery failures, calling for a new and more equitable economic framework.

He’s had a lot of pushback from around the country for being so outspoken. “I had people coming up to me in the airport lounge saying ‘Arch, we love you but please pray for us, don’t meddle in our space’”

Makgoba has long believed that, not only in SA, but internationally, the last decade has shown that “neither unbridled capitalism and globalisation, nor a centralised command economy will produce the growth and the jobs we need. He agrees with the pope that the current capitalist model is unsustainable.

“Across the world, the economic

ordering of society and the question of how we develop our material resources is central to the crises that afflict us.

“In South Africa, I have said that the old economic order must go. Inequality affects us all. I am a strong supporter of an initiative by the international faith community to advocate a new form of global governance and a new economic framework, which would transform the market economy from a self-serving mechanism for elites to one which is less exploitative and both serves our environment and distributes resources and income more equitably.”

His key message to parishioners during the time of coronavirus is that “even this storm will pass. Think of life beyond this time, work for justice and equality, recall the beautiful imagery of the psalm which says justice and peace have kissed each other.”

Watching how all the nations of the world have been dealing with the crisis, he said: “this has driven home the point that the world is one interdependent community. The virus doesn’t discriminate between country and town, north and south or east and west. It doesn’t carry a passport or observe borders.

“My prayer now is that we act as one across the world, and this patenting of medication – which means it goes only to those who can afford it – is unfortunate.

The voices we should be listening to at present include the WHO, along with those political leaders who are putting the people’s interests first, while those playing for party political points should be rejected with the contempt they deserve.

“Their populism, individualism and sovereignty talk is artificial. We are one common humanity and we need to find solutions for one common humanity, to reduce consumerism and materialism and learn how to share our food, knowledge and skills and care for this environment, because the trajectory we were taking as religious, community and political figures was leading us into an unsustainable world which as a Christian leader defies the flourishing of God’s people, making inequality the norm when we should all be working at being each other’s keeper.” – Sue Segar ■



# From another country

## 'He's no pharmaceutical genius, he's a vulture'

### Pharma con seeks prison release to 'help find Covid cure'

**L**AST MONTH, IN AN 11-PAGE LETTER posted on an American pharmaceutical company's website, Martin Shkreli called for his temporary release from a Pennsylvania prison to enable him to use his special skills "to assist in research work on Covid-19".

American health activists have rushed to oppose his application, citing his past history, and have launched a social media campaign to gather signatures for a mass petition to ensure his application for release from prison is not allowed.

Shkreli achieved notoriety after his pharmaceutical company in 2015 acquired the rights to manufacture Daraprim, a drug used in the treatment of malaria and HIV-infected patients – and then immediately limited its availability and mercilessly upped the price by 5,000%.

He is currently serving a seven-year sentence for (an unrelated) securities fraud in a Pennsylvania prison. (See editorial about the significance of that.)

As reported on Washington news site *The Hill* on 7 April, Shkreli has claimed in the letter/research proposal: "As a successful two-time biopharma entrepreneur, having purchased multiple companies, invented multiple new

drug candidates, filed numerous INDs and clinical trial applications, I am one of the few executives experienced in all aspects of drug development from molecule creation and hypothesis generation, to preclinical assessments and clinical trial design, target engagement demonstration, manufacturing/

**He acquired the rights to Thiola used to treat the rare disease cystinuria, then upped the price from \$1.50 to \$30 per pill. Patients need to take 10 pills per day**

synthesis and global logistics and deployment of medicines."

Which all sounds pretty promising, considering the dire predicament the world finds itself in. But then *The Hill* points out that Shkreli's proposal was co-authored by, amongst others, James Rondina, who previously wrote letters asking for leniency in Shkreli's 2017 conviction, and Kevin Mulleady, a man who, prosecutors claim, was an unindicted co-conspirator in the fraud case. And, notes *The Hill* reporter, Shkreli's letter was posted on the website of Prospero Pharmaceuticals, which contains no other information about the company save for a generic email address.

The application for his three-month "leave" from prison is being steered



Martin Shkreli

by well-known US criminal defence attorney Benjamin Brafman, who was his defence attorney in the securities fraud trial.

"He is looking for a way to shirk repaying his debt to society, by claiming his supposed expertise can combat the Covid-19 pandemic," declared Alex Lawson, a widely quoted health activist and executive director of Social Security Works, a non-profit advocacy group for expanding benefits to address America's growing retirement security crisis.

"Shkreli is seeking a three-month furlough, which may even be enough time for him to acquire the rights to a Covid-19 treatment and massively jack up the price. This is arguably the



Daraprim went from \$13.50 to \$750

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only pharmaceutical expertise he possesses,” said Lawson in support of the petition to keep Shkreli in jail.

“Let’s be clear: Martin Shkreli is not a pharmaceutical genius. He is a vulture, seeking to exploit a pandemic that’s killing thousands a day for personal gain.”

To find out more about Shkreli, *Noseweek* went to *Wikipedia*. Some extracts from its extensive profile:

He was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1983 to Bulgarian immigrant parents who both worked as janitors. By most accounts, he was raised Catholic.

Shkreli attended Hunter College High School. He dropped out before his senior year but received the credits necessary for his diploma through a programme that placed him in an internship at Wall Street hedge fund managers Cramer, Berkowitz and Company when he was 17. He received a bachelor’s degree in business administration from Baruch College in 2004.

During Shkreli’s time at Cramer, Berkowitz & Co he recommended short-selling the stock of Regeron Pharmaceuticals, a biotech company testing a weight-loss drug. When its price dropped in accordance with Shkreli’s prediction, Cramer’s hedge fund profited. Shkreli’s prediction drew the attention of the Securities and Exchange Commission, which investigated Shkreli’s knowledge about the stock but was unable to prove wrongdoing on his part.

He started his first hedge fund, Elea Capital Management, in 2006. In 2007, Lehman Brothers sued Elea for failing to cover a “Put Option” transaction in which Shkreli bet the wrong way on a broad market decline. When stocks rose instead, Shkreli didn’t have the funds to make the bank whole. In October 2007, Lehman Brothers won a \$2.3 million default judgment against Shkreli and Elea, but Lehman collapsed before it could collect on the ruling.

In September 2009, Shkreli and an old schoolmate started their own portfolio management company. They shorted biotech companies, then described flaws in the companies on stock trading chat rooms. In 2011 one such manoeuvre which did not come off cost Merrill Lynch \$7m.

In the same year, Shkreli filed requests with the FDA to reject a new cancer diagnostic device from Navidea Biopharmaceuticals and an inhalable insulin therapy from MannKind Corporation while publicly short-selling both companies’ stocks, the values of which dropped after Shkreli’s interventions. The companies had difficulty launching the products as a result, although the FDA ultimately approved both.

Also in that year he founded Retrophin, a portfolio company with an emphasis on biotechnology, to create treatments for rare diseases. During Shkreli’s tenure as CEO, the company’s employees used alias Twitter accounts to make gangster-rap jokes and encourage short-selling of other biotech stocks.

In May 2014, Shkreli was able to acquire rights to market tiopronin (brand name, Thiola), a drug used to treat the rare disease cystinuria, and Chenodal. He then raised the price of both drugs by substantial amounts: Thiola was marked up from \$1.50 to \$30 per pill (patients must take 10 to 15 pills a day), and Chenodal’s price went up fivefold.

After Shkreli’s departure in 2015, Retrophin filed a \$65m lawsuit against him related to a dispute over his use of company funds and allegations that he had “committed stock-



**Alex Lawson**

trading irregularities and other violations of securities rules”.

Shkreli and some of his business associates had been under criminal investigation by the US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York since January 2015. He routinely invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination in order to avoid testifying during civil depositions.

After leaving Retrophin, in February 2015, Shkreli founded Turing Pharmaceuticals. His business strategy for Turing: to obtain licences on out-of-patent medicines and re-evaluate the pricing of each in pursuit of windfall profits for the new company, without the need to develop and bring its own drugs to market. As markets for out-of-patent drugs for rare diseases are often small, and obtaining regulatory approval to manufacture a generic version is expensive, Turing calculated that with closed distribution for the product and no competition, it could set high prices.

On 10 August, 2015, in accordance with Shkreli’s business plan, Turing acquired Daraprim (pyrimethamine), a medication approved by the FDA in 1953, from Impax Laboratories. The drug’s most prominent use as of late 2015 was as an anti-malarial and anti-parasitic and, in conjunction with two other drugs, to treat patients with Aids-related toxoplasmosis.

The patent for Daraprim had expired, but no generic version was available.

The Turing-Impax deal included the condition that Impax remove the drug from regular wholesalers and pharmacies, so two months before the sale to Turing was announced, Impax switched to tightly controlled distribution. In keeping with its strategy for pricing in the face of limited competition, Turing maintained the closed distribution. *The New York Times* noted that the deal “made sense only if Turing planned to raise the price of the drug substantially.”

On 17 September 2015, Dave Muoio of *Healio*, a clinical information website, reported that the Infectious Diseases Society of America had written to executives at Turing, questioning the new pricing for Daraprim. The price of a dose of the drug in the US market had been increased from \$13.50 to \$750 per pill, overnight.

A subsequent protest campaign – including appeals from presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump – called on Turing to return pricing to pre-September levels and to address several matters relating to the needs of patients. The campaign garnered endorsements from more than 160 medical-speciality and patient-related organisations.

In a September 2015 interview with *Bloomberg*, Shkreli defended the price hike with this nonsensical argument: “If there was a company that was selling an Aston Martin at the price of a bicycle, and we buy that company and

## **In accordance with Shkreli’s plan, Turing acquired Daraprim, used to treat malaria and Aids-related toxoplasmosis, then upped the price 5,000%**

we ask to charge Toyota prices, I don’t think that that should be a crime.”

A few days later, Shkreli announced that he planned to lower the price by an unspecified amount, “in response to the anger that was felt by people”. But in late November, Turing reversed course and said it would not lower the price after all.

Following a request by Senator Sanders and Representative Elijah Cummings for details of Turing Pharmaceuticals’ finances and price-setting practices in September 2015, the company hired four lobbyists from Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney with backgrounds in health care legislation and pharmaceutical pricing. In addition to lobbyists, Shkreli hired a crisis public relations firm to help explain the pricing decision.

On 22 October 2015, Mark L Baum, CEO of Imprimis Pharmaceuticals

announced that his company would provide a combination product containing pyrimethamine (the active ingredient in Daraprim) and leucovorin at “\$1-a-pill” as a cheaper and more efficient alternative to Daraprim. This product is intended to be used alongside sulfadiazine in the standard protocol to treat toxoplasmosis typically seen in Aids patients.

Baum noted, “This is not the first time a sole supply generic drug – especially one that has been approved for use as long as Daraprim – has had its price increased suddenly and to a level that may make it unaffordable”. He announced the availability of the compounded replacement for Daraprim as a part of a larger corporate programme to make “novel and customisable medicines available to physicians and patients at accessible prices”. Imprimis is now offering its compounded, orally taken formulations of pyrimethamine and leucovorin beginning at \$99 for a 100-count bottle, essentially a dollar a dose.

Unfazed, on 23 November 2015, Turing announced that it would not reduce the price of Daraprim, but said it planned instead to negotiate volume discounts of up to 50% for hospitals, “where most patients get their initial treatment”. Infectious disease specialists quickly pointed out that patients initially treated for days at a hospital, typically have to continue the treatment for weeks or months after leaving.

After Shkreli was imprisoned, Turing changed its name to Vvera in 2017, and is presently named Phoenixus. In March 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Shkreli “steers his old company from prison”, using a contraband cell phone. Shkreli was effectively directing the renamed firm, and was reported to have terminated the employment of executive Kevin P Mullyeady. After this news broke, Shkreli was moved to a Federal prison in Pennsylvania and was facing a Bureau of Prisons investigation. Federal prison inmates are prohibited both from running a business from prison and from possessing cell phones.

And now he dares to apply to be released from prison so that he can employ his skills in the search for a cure for Covid-19. In America these days, it seems, anything is possible.

**– Compiled by Martin Welz ■**



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# From another country

For readers who love a conspiracy, meet...

## Larry Klayman – conspiracy litigant

**H**E HAS BEEN CALLED A NUTBAG lawyer, pathologically litigious and a serially vexatious litigant. For good reason.

True to his reputation, Larry Klayman has recently launched a US federal lawsuit based on the latest conspiracy theory. The American advocate and former US Justice Department prosecutor wants to see China in the International Criminal Court, explaining the origins of the current Coronavirus pandemic and paying \$20 trillion in compensation.

The 68-year-old Klayman has filed a class-action lawsuit in the US District Court of Texas, accusing the People's Republic of China of genocide and crimes against humanity. He is pushing the unsubstantiated claim that the Chinese government developed the virus as a biological weapon of war to unleash on the world, calling it a "callous, reckless and malicious act" – which indeed it would be, were it true.

The complainants are Buzz Photos and Klayman's own self-styled watchdog group, Freedom Watch, which he formed after an unsuccessful run for the US Senate in 2004. Texas based Buzz Photos, which specialises in high school sports photographs, claims to have lost "\$50,000 worth of business over one weekend alone" due to the pandemic.

Apart from China, the list of respondents includes the Chinese People's Liberation Army, the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its director, Shi Shengli. Klayman is charging them with wrongful death, assault and battery, material support for terrorism, negligence and a conspiracy to injure and kill Americans. He is also alleging that the purpose of maintaining the virus within the Wuhan laboratory was to use it to "kill citizens of the United States and other persons and entities in nations perceived to be an enemy of China."

"Although it appears that the Covid-19 virus was released at an

unplanned, unexpected time, it was prepared and stockpiled as a biological weapon to be used against China's perceived enemies, including but not limited to the people of the United States," the complainant states in court documents.

Klayman also claims the respondents violated international treaties and obligations under international law by withholding medical information on the spread of Covid-19, resulting in thousands of avoidable and unnecessary deaths, illnesses and massive damage to the world economy, caused by the delay in sharing information about the spread of the virus.

His assertion is based on an interview that the Washington Times conducted with Dany Shoham, a virologist at the Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv. In the interview Shoham speculates, "Outward virus infiltration might take place either as leakage or as an indoor unnoticed infection of a person that normally went out of the concerned facility." He says this could have been the case at the Wuhan Institute of Virology but that no evidence of such an incident exists so far.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology however, was the first to identify the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus and match it to a bat-species found in China. The current general consensus is that the virus infected humans when wild animals were slaughtered and sold at Wuhan's so-called wet market.

According to several American news platforms Klayman's claims about China has gained traction on the right, with the conservative media advocating a more aggressive US stance toward China.

Klayman is known for his aggressive

legal tactics and has been barred from appearing in two courts in the USA. Despite his poor record of winning cases his lawsuits have often resulted in the release of documents that were previously not made public but, once disclosed, generated new scandals.

He is called a Clinton nemesis because he filed around 18 lawsuits against the former US president and his administration, alleging ethical misconduct and criminal activity. In the Clinton-era, Klayman's watchdog organisation was awarded attorney fees of nearly a million dollars in a case against the US Department of Commerce in a fundraising scandal known as Chinagate. He also represented Gennifer Flowers and Dolly Kyle who both claimed to be Bill Clinton's mistresses. Later on he sought access to Hillary Clinton's private email server but the courts denied his request. He also filed an unsuccessful racketeering lawsuit against the Clintons and their Clinton Foundation.

During the Obama-era Klayman alleged that Barack Obama had forged



Larry Klayman

his birth certificate in order to pass the eligibility requirements for the American president. He submitted what he called a "deportation petition" against Obama, asking the authorities to begin the process of removing Obama from the US.

● Australia has since called for an international, independent inquiry into the origins of the Covid-19

pandemic. China interpreted this as front-running for a witch-hunt engineered by Washington to "isolate and humiliate" China. Its ambassador in Canberra hinted at economic sanctions should Australia persist in seeking international support for such an investigation. – Susan Puren ■

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# From another time

## Bush school – A memoir by Jack Lundin

**O**UR SCHOOL WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF the bush, ten miles from the nearest town in the harsh beauty of the Zimbabwean highveld. It started life in World War II as No 26 EFTS Guinea Fowl, a Royal Air Force elementary flying training school and I arrived there in 1954, just seven years after it became an all-white co-ed state boarding school.

The boarding houses were the cadet pilots' barracks, now called hostels, named after wartime bomber aircraft: Wellington, Lancaster, Sterling, Lincoln and Blenheim. The bell that roused us in the mornings and rang to notify the end of lessons, as well as to rally us out of bed in the middle of the night to fight encroaching wildfires, was the piercing wail of 26 EFTS's air-raided siren. In the Sixth-form classroom hung a framed letter titled *An Airman's Letter to his Mother*.

This was years before UDI, Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Then Southern Rhodesia was a self-governing colony and part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. I was an odd addition to the pupil strength, being decanted without much consultation at age 15 from my 400-year-old all-rowing-and-rugby English public school, and dropped off the steam train at Gwelo in the middle of the night with my mother and sister, who were heading on for Salisbury, now Harare, en route for a new life in Nyasaland, now Malawi.

Later that Sunday the headmaster collected us all in Gwelo, whisked my mother and sister off to his house for lunch and dumped me at Wellington hostel, where a boy with fuzz on his cheeks called Frost helped me carry my large tin trunk in to Middle Dorm, where I underwent intense grilling from the inhabitants.

"Do you play rugby?"

"Yes". I felt on safe ground here, as my public school was one of England's top rugby schools.

"What position?"

"Wing-forward."

A baffled silence. Then: "Bullshit! No such position!"

"Fuckin Pongo!" muttered someone. Then a voice piped up: "Hey, isn't that the same as flanker?" It was.

For good measure my reception committee hit me with a barrage of Afrikaans – even the English-speakers seemed adept at the language – which left me wondering how long I'd survive in this hellhole. But it was mostly



Jack Lundin

good-natured and only once was I hit with the old Boer War sin: "You Brits put our women and children into concentration camps". However, I was battle-hardened by five years at my English public school, from its pre-prep "Inky" to the Monday night thrashings – they called them slipperings – in Upper School for trivial misdemeanours. These were delivered by the house prefects. "You're going to get six! Take off your dressing gown!" the head of house would announce grimly, and each prefect thundered the length of the senior changing room to deliver his whack with an enormous wooden clothes brush on our pyjama-

clad behinds.

Although already 15 when I arrived at Guinea Fowl, I was selected to play for the under 15s in the following all important Saturday's home game against arch-rivals Milton from Bulawayo, or was it Prince Edward from Salisbury? I thought I would be too old for this age group, but apparently it depended on the date of your birthday in relation to the current rugby season, and I just scraped in. That outing eased my reception into the school, and even Frost, my helper with the trunk who was also in my class, seemed to approve.

But I came unstuck in the next inter-school match. This time I was relegated to reserve and as such had to act as linesman. I'd never done this role before, and was baffled by the hand and flag signals I had to make: did I point to the side who had put the ball out of touch, or the side who should take the throw-in?

My dismal performance gave the entire school, massed in the pitch-side pavilion, a sideshow that they pounced on with glee. Screams of derision greeted my every decision. I still don't know how I managed to survive the game, but I never stepped on a rugby field again. I blamed the U15 coach, the gym master known as Slimy, for putting me through this ordeal.

Wellington house was rows of barracks connected by a central corridor. At one end was the prep room, then Senior Dorm, Middle Dorm and Junior Dorm, with intervening locker rooms. The ablutions block consisted of cold-water showers (never used) and a row of eight-or-so baths, into which we jammed ourselves morning and evening, three or four to a bath, legs hanging over the edge. The toilets were disgusting and apparently escaped the eagle eye of our matron, the chain-smoking Mrs Poisson. The floor swam in urine, with boys from farms squatting high in the rafters for long distance craps – they were accustomed to a hole in the ground and their bowels refused to function

on a normal pedestal.

My single appearance for the under-15s spared me the ordeal of the traditional New Boys' Concert, when the annual intake of 13-year-olds in Junior Dorm underwent a scary initiation. Before it was banned, this included running naked down the long corridor linking the dormitories, lined with boys wielding wet knotted towels, causing at least one knock-out.

Rugby at Guinea Fowl ranked above anything else.

Attendance at First XV matches was compulsory and if we lost, the entire school went into mourning. After my touchline humiliation my energies were focussed on the dramatic society, run enthusiastically by our theatre-buff headmaster, HE Pegg, who considered drama to be in the forefront of school activities. The school went into hysterics at my portrayal, wearing a white wig, of the despotic headmistress Miss Philpott in *Little Ladyship*, the 1939 comedy by Ian Hay. "The part of a typical school marm seemed to suit J. Lundin down to the ground," was the waspish comment by its reviewer PJW aka Peter Wilson, a friend who was head of rival Lancaster house.

I won Best Actor award in the first Schools' Drama Festival as Alquist in *The Epilogue of R.U.R* (for Rossum's Universal Robots), the 1921 science fiction play by Karel Capek that introduced the word robot to the English language. And finally played the blundering buffoon Teddy Deakin in *The Ghost Train*, the 1923 comedy thriller by Arnold Ridley. I was amazed and flattered to read Mr Pegg's review in the school magazine that *The Ghost Train* was marked "by a very good piece of acting by Jack Lundin". He added: "Lundin stands head and shoulders above all those who have acted at this

school, with the possible exception of Pam Dale; his versatility is remarkable, his speech is very nearly faultless and his sense of timing in comedy is worthy of many professionals."

A few years later found us both in London. I had returned to England when I was 20 and we met for a lunchtime beer. By then I was a staff reporter in Fleet Street with the *Sunday Express*. Mr Pegg had been appointed education liaison officer at Rhodesia House up the road in the Strand.



Jack as headmistress in school play

Now, of course, Rhodesia is Zimbabwe and Gwelo is Gweru. At the other end of the hazardous strip road that connected us with Gwelo was the chromium-mining town of Selukwe, now Shurugwi. On Sundays we dispersed into the bush with sandwich lunches. We built tree houses, had *kleilatte* fights, swam naked in farmers' water tanks and filled army kitbags with raids on their avocado crops. Along with this, we collected an assortment of wildlife which endured usually short lives as our pets in captivity.

We had to keep them hidden from the authorities. In great demand were *pukkies*, or bushbabies, loveable

nocturnal animals who spent the day sleeping inside their owner's shirt. They came to life in the evenings, when they would make long leaps from wherever they were to the safety of their owner's shirt, peeing on their hands for grip. Their natural diet included insects, beetles, moths and butterflies, but ours adapted to fruit – they loved bananas. Lemurs and civets were said to be around, but if they were caught it was kept secret.

Bes, Mac and I had an owl. Poor

Egbert lived in a cardboard box under Senior Dorm and every after-lunch rest period was spent throwing rocks at lizards on the squash court wall, for his food.

On one occasion some farm boys in Middle Dorm introduced a forest cobra which must have been eight to ten feet long. The most vivid memory I have of Guinea Fowl is the bedtime chaos when they put it in the bed of a boy they didn't like. When their victim, alerted by the slowly-shifting mass in his bed threw back the blanket, out soared the maddened

reptile. Every boy leapt as one from their bed into the roof rafters, and perched there screaming as the hissing cobra, hood spread and upper body high off the ground, crashed around the dorm in search of an escape route or someone to deliver its massive amount of venom to (death usually in 30 to 120 minutes). It escaped eventually, but sadly was hunted down and butchered by the farm boys.

On Wednesday afternoons we had cadets, falling in with ancient .303 rifles on the crumbling main runway of No 26 EFTS Guinea Fowl under the high-decibel shriek of Sergeant Major John Erasmus, a ferocious giant of a man who arrived every week from the



Royal Rhodesia Regiment's Llewellyn Barracks in Bulawayo. He was rumoured to have killed a man in the ring.

In the afternoons, I often wandered the deserted runway. At my school in England my friends and I were determined to do our national service as pilots in the Royal Air Force. An older boy in our house was already flying Hawker Hunter fighter jets off a carrier in the Fleet Air Arm. So at Guinea Fowl, homesick for what I had left behind, I pictured myself as one of the cadet pilots who took to the air only ten years-or-so back at 26 EFTS doing their circuits, cross-countries and night flying in Tiger Moths, Link trainers and Chipmunks.

In my exam year – we took the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate – our housemaster in Wellington departed back to England on his six months “home” leave. In those colonial days a lot of the teachers were recruited in England, with the carrot of this long leave every three years. Our acting housemaster was the gym master, Slimy, whom I held responsible for my linesman fiasco. I was determined to show no ill feeling, but on his first day he approached me with a declaration of war. “I’ve been warned about you, Lundin. Be warned, I’m watching you!”

One morning as we lined up for the march to the dining hall for breakfast, we were greeted with an astonishing sight. In the middle of the night, someone had painted in massive letters SLIMY IS A SAP along the entire length of his cream-painted housemaster’s cottage. That afternoon, as we lay on our beds for the rest period, a wrought-up Slimy appeared clutching a bundle of canes. “Lundin, come with me.”

He marched off down the corridor linking the dorms, the whole hostel watching agape. In Junior Dorm he strode into the prefects’ quarters at the end, slammed the door shut and told me: “I’m going to give you the thrashing of your life.”

“Sir,” I protested. “It wasn’t me.”

“Ha! Then who was it?”

“I don’t know.” (which was the truth).

“So, honour amongst thieves!” sneered Slimy. “Bend over!”

He broke a few of his canes on me, but I maintained silence throughout. After my regular “slipperings” by the English boarding house prefects, Slimy’s effort was little more than an irritant. Finally the onslaught ceased. “Get out!” spat the acting housemaster. When I opened the door to Junior Dorm the little 13-year-olds were frozen on their beds, staring goggle-eyed at me. I turned to Slimy and said brightly: “Thank you sir, anything else sir?”

“Get out!” screamed Slimy again, and Junior Dorm broke into hysterical laughter. I chalked it up as a moral victory.

The year after I left I was working as a cadet reporter on *The Herald’s* training programme in Salisbury when I bumped into David Spengler, a sort of friend of mine in Wellington House, who had been expelled for taking off for a few days without permission. As we chatted in the street he announced with a wide grin: “I painted that thing on Slimy’s house.” My intrigue at finally discovering the mystery painter’s identity was eclipsed by a mounting fury. How could someone have stood by and seen a friend thrashed for something that he had done? I never spoke to Spengler again.

Soon after I left, at the end of 1959, Guinea Fowl became boys only. The



Guinea Fowl pupils today



A recent photo of the Guinea Fowl buildings

girls' presence had certainly been appreciated by the boys. Romance was often in the air and if things got serious a couple would get formally "hitched". This custom was taken very seriously and spanned all schools in Rhodesia at the time. If a Guinea Fowl boy was hitched to a girl at Eveline High School in Bulawayo, and dared to cast an eye at anyone else, his good name and reputation was ruined for good. The same for the girl.

The upshot was predictable. Every year saw the quiet departure of a few girls who found themselves in the family way. I remember one morning assembly when headmaster Pegg obliquely addressed the issue. Giving his seal of approval for boy and girl to continue the ritual of walking the school's jacaranda-clad avenues hand in hand, he added: "Just keep walking!"

Finally, in 1978 and a year from the end of the 13 year bush war that was to give birth to Zimbabwe, Guinea Fowl School was closed down, after 31 years. In vain the boys in their Number Ones and boaters marched in protest through the streets of Gwelo. But their parents considered the isolated school a soft target for attack and opted for the grenade-screened security of schools in the cities. From a pupil strength of more than 400, only 223 remained. The last Form One intake numbered only 10.

However, the old RAF flying school continued its chameleon existence. Its remoteness was utilised for training by Ian Smith's notorious Security Force Auxiliaries, the all-black militia known as Pfumo Revanhu. After independence, it became the headquarters

of President Robert Mugabe's infamous 5th Brigade.

Then, wonder of wonders, in 1998 it became Guinea Fowl School again, although after three years it was briefly renamed Nelson Ndamere High School. However, an old boy who visited in 2011, now a parish priest



Jack in his youth

from northern Victoria in Australia named Canon Andrew Neaum, wrote in his parish newsletter that the name had gone back to Guinea Fowl again. Canon Neaum reported that the school's friendly Shona headmistress was aware of the school's tradition and had dreams of reviving its reputation and prowess, not least in rugby, despite labouring under shortage of funds and other difficul-

ties. "She kept apologising for the state of the place, saying again and again how she wished to return it to its former glory."

The security boom at the school entrance was lifted without question to visiting old boys. The present-day all-black learners were generous with their enthusiastic and unqualified welcomes. Neaum wrote that they still wore the original uniform of blue shirts, grey shorts (khaki shorts in my day) and navy blue blazers bearing the school badge: a red guinea fowl over the school motto "*Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*" (Gentle in manner, vigorous in deed).

Another old boy shot a video of his return visit. My heart gave a lurch when I saw them enter a derelict Wellington House and into the prefect's quarters where I received my whacking from Slimy. There are the corridors linking the dorms. There is Middle Dorm, where I began and where boys leapt for their lives into the rafters to escape the angry forest cobra.

Gentle in manner, vigorous in deed.

The school motto's Vigorous in deed certainly describes the way I remember those heady days. But Gentle in manner? Hardly. As Canon Neaum wrote in his parish newsletter: "Discipline was strict, fair, brutal and largely effective. The prefect system was adhered to with some favour. In a lot of ways it was a good school, although the last step before the borstal for city school rejects." ■



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**Brent Meersman is a journalist and chairman of the Cape Town Press Club. Who would have thought he would write a book, *A Childhood Made Up – Living with my mother's madness*, that is not just a remarkable and moving childhood autobiography – it is a work of art, a rare phenomenon in South African literature.**

***Noseweek* is honoured to be able to republish the first chapter. Read it and I do not doubt you will be reading the rest of the book as soon as you can lay your hands on it. – Martin Welz**

## A childhood made up

### Living with my mother's madness

**W**AS TWO YEARS OLD WHEN THE EARTHQUAKE of 1969 shook mother earth beneath me with such a force it woke me in my cot. I've subsequently read that the seismic wave was six point five on the Richter scale. There hadn't been an earthquake in the Western Cape since 1809 and there hasn't been one since, but my mother lived in dread of earthquakes from then on, often detecting ominous tremors in the earth. She was also convinced it was only a matter of time before a tidal wave would wash Cape Town out to sea.

"There was an eerie rumbling that built into a crescendo – a shuddering roar," my mother recalled. "The whole building was shaking; the paintings went skew; bottles danced on the table. We grabbed you and all of us ran out into the street.

"Most kids would have started howling their little heads off – ripped from their cots like that in the middle of the night. But you were looking around, staring at all of us standing there – on the street in our night-clothes – looking at us with your shining brown eyes... And then you gave us all the most radiant smile. You were like a little angel, assuring us that all was well, and we'd all be all right. I kissed you on the cheek and suddenly I felt very calm."

I remembered the neighbour across the road; he ran out into the street stark naked. His wife screamed at him and chased him back into the house, which, for all anyone knew at that stage, might well have been a death trap about to tumble down. But he went back in.

"How could you possibly remember that?" Mom said. "You were far too young." She was obviously alarmed, for what else did I remember? Perhaps it was a memory planted by her telling

me the story before, but I could tell she was slightly shocked by how much I did recall, and a bit afraid when I dared to mention things that had happened in our home, when I braved the silence that often enveloped us, hinting at the unspeakable.

As a kid, I don't think I ever overheard anything I wasn't meant to, because things of such a nature were never discussed at home. I remembered how, when I was a small child supposed to be asleep, my mother would slip into bed behind me and hold me. She would be trembling. She couldn't hide it no matter how young I was. "Go to sleep, go to sleep," she'd say, as if that would save us.

I remember her saying she saw a dazzling, golden light, like an aura, shining around my head. I clearly recall seeing her in the dead of night standing next to the refrigerator with a carving knife in her hand, ready to stab. She said she did not remember that.

There were other things she would rather forget but which I remembered. And then somehow, as I grew up, I forgot. I forgot almost all of it. Strange, isn't it, that one forgets one's childhood and yet it never leaves one?

It was painful and funny when I started to remember again, my memory jogged by going to a psychotherapist for the first time as I approached the milestone age of fifty. At first there

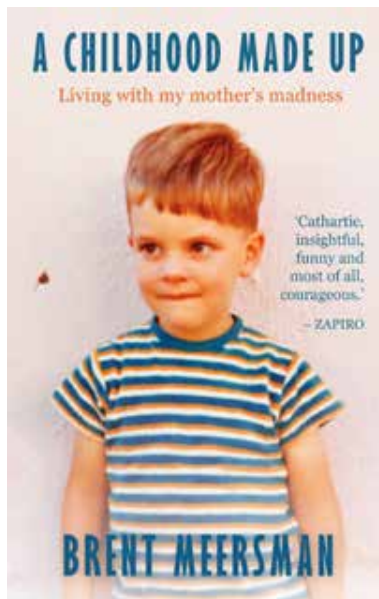
wasn't much order to my recollections – fleeting images I couldn't connect to episodes in my past: the glare of a fridge opened at night; smells of tins filled with ash; the metallic taste of a small blue pill. I recalled the softness of my sky-blue blanket, the one I hid beneath as a child and found hard to leave behind as I grew up.

What I had experienced as a child was coming back to me: unveiled memories that would stop me in mid-conversation or surprise me while I might be out walking in the midday sun. It was like falling asleep under a giant tree somewhere out in the veld and then waking up to find yourself overrun by biting ants. My body remembered what my mind had forgotten; memories that made me burst out laughing and others that put me on the edge of tears.

Because of these reactions, which were sudden and usually came two days after a session, the therapist began insisting on seeing me twice a week. Our process was classic psychoanalysis – on the couch with my back to her.

I began to recall various traumatic incidents, seemingly unaware that they were traumatic. She would have to stop me: "Wait, wait, wait... please rewind... Did you just say it happened shortly after your father tried to commit suicide?"

"Yes."





“I think we need to pause a bit and talk about that, don’t you?” she’d say, or words to that effect. But I couldn’t remember what I had felt at the time such things happened. There was only numbness; the numbness of turning events into matters of fact. An instinct for survival, perhaps, but I became more preoccupied with trying to understand and empathise with my mother and later my father and still later others around me, rather than to comprehend myself. Compassion is my default. I take a great interest in other people, yet at the same time I can be uncannily absent in their company. It is how I protected myself as a child, always placing a pane of glass between me and them, between stoic Brent and my family. But it wasn’t bullet proof. For I recall how, aged twelve, I started rehearsing for my own suicide. I was still unsure if I wanted to recollect such dark details. I wanted to cling to the fairy tale I had been telling myself and others all these years about my childhood and my family –

the story about how my mother was an angel and loved me unconditionally, about how my father was an abused child but broke the pattern and never raised a hand against his own children. It is the tale we tell ourselves about how fortunate we have been compared to so many others, about how our parents’ failings helped us become the unique creatures we are. It is the uplifting story about how thankful we are for the hardships we’ve suffered, because these have given us our rare qualities.

Should I not then have left memory alone and rather stayed content with the childhood I had made up? After all, what my therapist called my

“coping mechanisms” were solidly in place. I can with confidence tick nearly every box on any standard list of the characteristics of a psychologically healthy person. There may have been a dark whirlpool at the centre of my upbringing, but I had learned how to paddle.

But it was no use – psychoanalysis had unblocked my memory; my made-up childhood was coming apart. What is repressed must also be heard; the full story was demanding to be told. I had blotted out far too much for far too long.

● This extract from *A Childhood Made Up – living with my mother’s madness* by Brent Meersman published here with the kind permission of the author and the publisher, *Tafelberg*. ■



**Brent Meersman**



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## Okay, Okay, Okay - Finuala Dowling

IT'S BEEN SAID BEFORE THAT FINUALA Dowling has something of Jane Austen about her writing, with her ability to pick up the minute details of her characters' lives and the spaces they inhabit. It's an accolade that Dowling herself once shied away from when her novel *The Fetch* was launched, saying that she could see some similarities, but also that she certainly hadn't sought out the comparison.

In *Okay, Okay, Okay* Dowling uses the most fabulous satire, another Austen characteristic, to tell the story of several people all linked to Adamastor University. It's set in the leafy heights of the southern suburbs of Cape Town, so little chance that the reader will not know exactly which institution she is writing about. But her choice of the name has a delicious meaning, according to various sources,

I chose *capepoint.co.za*: 12 Titans were born before the Greek Gods and Adamastor was the untamed one. Like most deities of any real interest in terms of storytelling, Adamastor fell in love with the wrong woman and was turned into a rocky mountain at the tip of Africa. Apparently, he frightened the Portuguese sailors of yore who had to round the Cape of Storms.

So, there's a delicious irony in writing about a once powerful institution brought low by a series of somewhat awkward events, frightening the heck out of the people who call it their academic home.

Dowling draws together a delightful set of characters and places them around the university or at it when the times they are a-changing, and things are required to fall.

Vida is a sound engineer, a fiery redhead, and an expert at her job. When we meet her she's finishing up a lucrative gig in Turkey and about to travel home to Kalk Bay. It's a nomadic life in some ways, but one Vida loves. She gets to earn good foreign currency that keeps her going, between travels, in quirky Kalk Bay. Of course it is no secret that Dowling lives in Kalk Bay, and that she grew up in a large family. It's also no secret that her sister Cara Dowling is a very well-known and brilliant sound engineer (admission; and was a great friend of mine at Stellenbosch in the early

1980s). Vida isn't Cara, but there are shadows that lurk, and they are lovely.

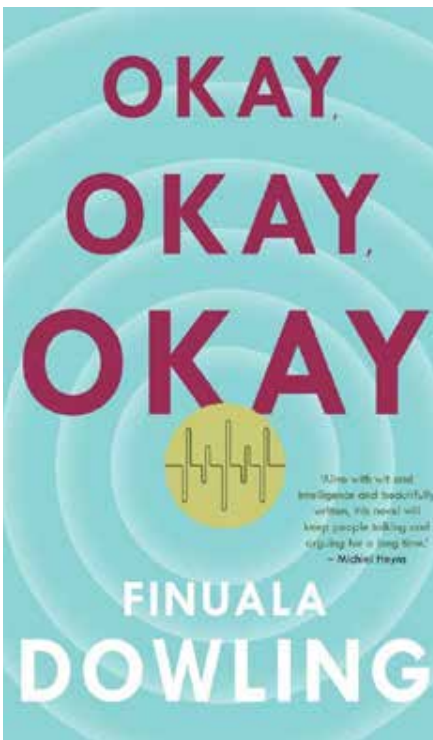
Vida's connection to Adamastor comes after she discovers that she has peeved an influential producer and that she isn't about to get a gig she thought she would, so she's rather broke, but of good cheer. When

she is offered a gig at Adamastor doing the sound for a fund raising evening she takes it. It's here that she meets the Head of Effective Communication, Simon Landor, a former professor of English who has taken an admin job so that he can give his beloved wife a house with all the "Rondebosch" comforts. It's a pity that he has missed the fact that what Miriam really wanted from him was time to finish her thesis on Olive Schreiner and/or her never-finished "Big Novel". It's also a pity that she has died and left Simon and his daughter Cecily alone to muddle

along, with the addition of Loyiso who has become an "adopted" son and is a damn fine fast bowler for an old-tie boys' school.

So much for the story characters. The plot ranges from blind faith in one's usefulness, or being a useful idiot, to the fees-must-fall movement. It covers the sadness of those who have made academia their home, and now find that all the furniture is being tossed around. They are being plagued by Adamastor.

**'If you agree with them, my dear girl why did you shout at them? He waited for her to reply, but Khanyi was digging for something in her pocket. At last she found what she was looking for: a rolled up tissue. She reached across the gear lever and dabbed his bleeding knuckle'**



**OKAY OKAY OKAY**  
BY FINUALA DOWLING  
(Kwela Books)



Like any well-plotted novel – and all of Dowling’s are – her characters have flaws. Simon’s is that he has hitched his wagon to the wrong star. He’s a good man who has given up what he loves the most: teaching for a wealthier life, but it seems chimeric at times.

Bruno, his insanely sex-mad friend, keeps having affairs with the wrong women, and Simon has to deal with him and his charm. Simon is the character in the book who gracefully takes the fall for the big guys, leaving him vulnerable in a way he doesn’t see coming.

There are larger issues contained in the day-to-day comings and goings of this charming crew of characters. One of these revolves around how women are so often not listened to by the medical profession. It would be a spoiler to say how, but it is an

important matter for our society and a failure that has killed many young women.

The other is Dowling’s ability to see a complex issue, like the fees-must-fall movement, from all sides, with heartbreaking humour. The lack of institutional care is highlighted in this totally compelling story, but in a visceral and real way. With her lens firmly focussed on the human side of the story, Dowling brings a fraught situation to life. To use an old saw, she makes the personal political. Thankfully she does it with a grace and lack of judgement that makes this not only a great piece of literature, but also a social commentary without ever becoming mealy-mouthed.

Dowling is able to write about Xhosa culture and students without being patronising because she knows them.

Viwe, Simon’s assistant, has personal dreams that he has put on hold because he is in debt. His sister Siphokazi is literally the poster girl hanging on the walls of the stairs leading up to Simon’s department, but she is also the figure who stands for the great personal tragedy that befalls many in the attempt to make inclusion a real thing at South Africa’s largely white and endowed universities.

Through Dowling’s depiction of the everyday she takes simple acts and gives them a gravity of meaning that shocks. She sees people as the complicated and often misguided creatures we all are. Human, subject to hurt and the vicissitudes of fate, funny and real at the same time.

A truly accomplished book that made me roar with laughter, go green with jealousy at the sheer power of Dowling’s writing, and cry at times. ■

## American Dirt – Jeanine Cummins

**L**YDIA OWNS A BOOKSHOP; HER HUSBAND Sebastian is a journalist who is not scared to put his byline on stories about the drug lords who control Acapulco where they live with their son Luca. Middle class, midline scared.

At a birthday celebration, a friendship that Lydia has made in her bookstore and a story Sebastian has written come together in a ghastly confluence; where everyone except Lydia and Luca are slain.

And so begins Jeanine Cummins’s story of a middle-class woman and her son taking the road to the North, to an uncertain chance of asylum, due to a relationship with a family member she barely knows.

*American Dirt* is a remarkably well-told story and intriguing in that it tells it from the perspective of a middle-class family, and a mom who has no real survival skills. At a time when her life is shattered, she will have to rely on the kindness of sometimes seemingly dangerous characters.

There is another level to the book though that raises it above another story of asylum seeking, and the

tragedy that South Americans are forced to leave their homes to go to a country that, under its present leader, really wants them less than it ever has before.

That level is the story of the loss that Javier, her “friend” from the bookshop has suffered because of the story that Sebastian has written about him. It’s a brave step to allow a villain – and this is no noble crook, he is an evil man – to have human feelings and to act because of the tragedy of losing what is dearest to him.

A complex tale of human suffering, fear and a long road taken. It might have done with a tighter edit in places, but all-in-all a good story, and chronicle of the horrors of life on the run.

Janine Cummins is the author of three previous books: a memoir entitled *A Rip in Heaven* and two novels: *The Outside Boy*, and *The Crooked Branch*. She was born

in the US, of mixed Puerto Rican and Irish heritage, and her husband immigrated to the United States from Ireland.

There has been controversy from Latin American authors about whether Cummins had the right to tell the story of Latin American migration to the US. Even though the novel hit the best-seller lists, and was picked by Oprah Winfrey, her publishers cancelled a book tour in the US because of threats to her safety. This has prompted arguments from both sides about her right to tell the story, in terms of the argument about cultural appropriation. She has received support from members of the group known as the Latinix writers, and the threats against her have been decried by advocates of free speech and the right of authors to tell stories about cultures and experiences that are not their own. ■



**AMERICAN DIRT**  
BY JEANINE CUMMINS  
(Tinder Press)



# Never take a hypochondriac to a pandemic

From Ronald Wohlman's New York Corona Diary

## Day 30. A Lazy Easter Sunday afternoon

**H**APPY EASTER TO ALL MY FRIENDS celebrating this chocolaty holiday. I hope you've all had a great day. Blessings. But back to me now. (It's funny, I just received a review of this diary from a new reader in Spain, and she said, "...you have the perfect blend of narcissism and paranoia.") So, running with the narcissism for just a sec, it's my birthday in three weeks. *Cinco de Mayo*/May 5th. Just mentioning it now in case you'd like to send something. You know, with deliveries all running slower than usual, you might want to hop on that first thing tomorrow. Just a thought. A Peloton Bike would be so amazing. Thank you. Gosh. Amazing!!! But it's up to you. It's the thought that counts. Really. I mean, honestly, gifts at my age, I love 'em!!! A funny card with a serious check, also a lovely thought. I'll leave it with you. Talk amongst yourselves. Maybe a surprise party? Today's been a slow day. A *Zoom* here, a *WhatsApp* there. A lovely scroll on *Instagram*. A drop in at *Houseparty* (don't know what the hell that app's about). Some texting. One voice-call. *FaceTime* with Zoe. A *Facebook* entry. Meme catch-ups in group chats. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* online. *The New Yorker* online. *YouTube*. I loved *SNL* last night. They did a great job. This pandemic has truly pulled into focus our dependency on digital living. But also how brilliantly it all works. *Fresh Direct* just delivered. Do we even need to return to "normal" life? Oh, I excitedly signed up for my first online yoga/breathing session today called *Seven Senses*, and I paid \$7, so I naturally assumed it was at 7pm. It was at 11am I missed it. Ok friends, let's call it a Sunday. I know, we never talk about you. We will. We have time. I promise. Blessings on all of your heads. One love.

## Day 38. Got to get you into my life

**H**appy 420-day everyone. I've just come from a 420 *Zoom* party. It felt like I was in a coffee shop in Amsterdam. It started at 4.20pm naturally. And most of the attendees lit up. I don't have weed in the pod, but even if I did I wouldn't smoke because I'm reserving lung power in case of "you know who". But in the spirit of the day, I did take a nibble of an edible, so let's see where that takes me. (To all my shrink friends, you know who you are, please be on standby.) I'm also drinking a Blue Moon Belgium style beer. Drinking in the afternoon is certainly something I should look into. I've had a big day today. I actually went into a grocery store and shopped. At great speeds. I'm a corona shopper who thinks the faster he's in 'n out the store, the safer he'll be. So I Nascar the fuck down the aisles, riding that cart like a teenage skater. What I must look like? 53. Blue rubber gloves. Ndebele-print mask. Fogged-up glasses. Pants that never seem to hold up because I have no ass. A long, scruffy grey beard and unruly hair. Throwing things into the cart like I'm on too many Adderall. Some bastard approached me in the vegetable aisle, he kept coming closer, obviously unable to see my silent scream because the mask covers my mouth. So he gets way too close to me and asks "Do you happen to know if this is a white cabbage?" I MEAN FUCK!!! 11 fucking words, standing that close to me? Seriously? You couldn't stand 6ft away, raise the fucking cabbage into the air and ask questioningly, "White cabbage??" Jesus. Christ. And anyway, does anyone give a fuck what colour cabbage you're cooking in your stinking Pandemic Pod tonight? "TAKE THE FUCKING CABBAGE AND STEP AWAY FROM THE JEW!!" I yelled kindly. Wouldn't that just be great?

38 days of hiding from Corona, and it catches me over a cabbage. It's so dangerous to go out there man. People don't respect the 6ft rule. People are so, so dumb. Just take a look at the "President" of my country. Who, by the way, is encouraging people to gather and riot in the streets to protest the stay-at-home orders in their states. I don't know man. I just don't know. Humans. Can't live with them can't live without them. God bless. Stay safe. Not sober.

● Our guest columnist Ronald Wohlman was born in Springs and raised in Benoni and Boksburg ["God!"], then bounced around the globe looking for a place to call home. That place turned out to be New York City, where he's been for 24 years. He was a copywriter for various agencies for as many years. More about him in our next issue. — Ed. ■



Ronald Wohlman



## Everybody drinks Corona

I AM HESITANT TO GO INTO THE PUB today. Not because it's illegal, but there is a crème coloured 1985 Mercedes 300D parked behind the pine tree. This means the devil is inside; that's what we call Dr De Villiers. You don't know whether you will encounter the good doctor with the charming bedside manner or the violent, bipolar bully. The problem is, most of the time, you can never be sure which it is, so it's best to always keep a social distance.

I do the secret knock. Jan opens the door, wielding a spray bottle like a Glock 9mm: "Sanitise before entering!" he commands. He's decked out in camo pants, his welder's gloves and a balaclava. Pssst! Pssst! My hands smell funny. It must be strong stuff because my eyes are watering. "Sorry Comrade," Jan says, "But this is a battle we all have to fight together." "Viva," I mumble and sidestep past him.

Doctor devil has taken office in the centre of the counter, sampling a Corona with a sparkle in his eye. "How are you doing, darling?" he asks and orders some drinks: "Two Bheki Celes for me and a Fake News for the lady please."

"Watsegoed?" I ask. "Two shooters and a Castle Free," the barman explains.

I give thanks and report that I am fever-free and thus fine. "Au contraire, my diagnosis is that everybody has Corona fever in this shebeen," says Dr De Villiers. "It's the best thing that's ever happened to them." He points to Jan: "Now Boetie over there *was nie border toe nie* like the rest of us. Dodged the draft. It's something he has been deeply ashamed of his whole life. Suddenly, he is a soldier in a World War, and he's put himself in the front-line. Sad Sack in real life, Captain Corona in a time of crisis."

Jan is lurching around the pub, clumsily trying to salute with the

plastic bottle in his one hand while asking for a donation with the other.

"He looks very intoxicated for a person who cannot afford to buy booze," I say. "Well, some people like their alcohol with a splash of tonic," observes the doctor, "Jan prefers his 70% alcohol with a 0.5% splash of Chlorhexidine."



"He's been dopping the hand sanitiser?" I gasp, "Then what is he spraying on our hands?" I smell again and recognise the aroma of Domestos rim block. I guess if it "Kills all known germs dead, even in the nastiest of places" it will work in one of the nastiest places in Germiston.

"You know this little virus is not just a *force majeure* for insurance compa-

nies," Doc muses: "It's an opt-out clause for many people. For once, everything is a catastrophe; your health, your business, those goals you never achieved – but this time, you have nothing to do with it. People are wiping the slate clean with breathtaking herd impunity. It gives them meaning. Purpose. Once in a lifetime opportunity." I don't want to agree with the guy, so I say nothing.

Billy interrupts the silence with a wet gurgling cough and a heavy sigh.

She's sitting in her usual place in the corner, drinking beer through a straw and smoking her Camel plains through holes she's cut in her mask. She says she's terrified she's caught the virus. The doctor reassures her: "Billy, as your GP, here's the good news – you almost definitely do not have Covid-19. You are dying of cancer, sweetheart. With diabetes competing for a close second, caused by a life of hard-drinking smoking and eating rubbish. You are old, it's the circle of life, my dear." He walks over to her and consoles her by showing her a packet of tablets. "Do you want these? Proven to fight Covid-19?" Billy reaches for the pills, but the doctor pulls it away. His eyes flash dark and true: "I'll have to charge a levy sweetheart, this stuff is not available over the counter. I'll just add it to the loan you have with me, cheers?"

Billy nods her head and swallows a tablet immediately. "Thank you, doctor."

"What's in the tablets?" I ask. The Doc approaches, squeezes me firmly on the shoulder and answers: "Hope. It works better than anything else I have ever prescribed. Trust me, I'm a doctor."

The barman switches the TV on. The president is about to make another speech. Between the devil's medicine and a politician's promises, I wonder which placebo will be the tougher pill to swallow. ■



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