

House of Stone

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Reviewed by Stuart Notholt, FRGS, FCIJ

In this powerful account, award-winning *Sunday Times* correspondent Christina Lamb uses all her journalistic and story-writing powers to explore the human consequences of political strife through the lives of two people born in 1962; Nigel Hough, a privileged white citizen of Ian Smith's Rhodesia, and Aqui Chingarire, born on the unproductive Native Reserves land that Rhodesia allocated to its majority black population.

The contrast between the experiences of these two young people is stark, and deliberately so. Aqui must walk 45 minutes just to get water; Nigel's idea of what constitutes a 'tough' life is being obliged to attend his English-style Public School. Both are victims of beatings. But whereas Aqui's are at the hands of a drunken father (and, later, husband) Nigel receives his 'cuts', or canings, for schoolboy naughtiness and general insubordination. Nigel dreams of joining the Rhodesian Army to fight the 'terrs'. Aqui, meanwhile, becomes an active member of her local ZANU cell. Throughout *House of Stones* the story of Rhodesia's tragedy is told through first-hand quotations from the two main characters, as well as quotations from many of the other key protagonists.

Both individuals experience changes to their personal viewpoints following Zimbabwe's creation in 1980. For Nigel, as for many Rhodesians, it is in a general softening of his views towards black people, a process accelerated by his adoption of the Christian faith, which proves to be another bond between himself and Aqui. For Aqui, as she sees the former 'freedom fighters' she trusted and admired being driven in Mercedes while the people continue to suffer, an equally inevitable disillusionment sets in. Aqui becomes the trusted nanny to the Hough family. And then the farm seizures start...

Even by the twisted standards of legality in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, the Hough's farm should not have been seized. It had been purchased from the post-1980 Zimbabwean Government and by all accounts Nigel and his wife were humane and progressive employers. Nevertheless, this does not prevent a group of 'war veterans' seizing the farm, which they do in August 2002. To Nigel's shock, they are lead by Aqui. His reaction is one of disbelief; not only at the theft of his farm, but even more so at Aqui's personal betrayal. Aqui's motives are rather more complex. She has no animus towards the Houghs - rather the contrary. But at the same time she believes land seizures have a basis in justice; furthermore, as a legitimate war veteran herself, she believes she is entitled - more so than the suspiciously young 'veterans' who have invaded the farm - to a share in the spoils of victory. (The story of Nigel and Aqui has an unexpected twist, however, which you will have to buy the book to discover.)

All peoples have their national myths. When two peoples occupy the same land, this is a fatal recipe for conflict, as we have seen in Kosovo, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Northern

Ireland. Rhodesia/Zimbabwe similarly reminds us what can happen when national mythologies collide.

The broad sweep of Rhodesian history, as well as many of the individual anecdotes described, will be familiar to those who have studied the region. Nevertheless, to both experienced Africanists and newcomers to the subject, *House of Stone* is a comprehensive, highly readable, and at times deeply moving introduction. A beautiful, near-perfect piece of journalism.

Stuart A Notholt
Chartered Institute of Journalists, London

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