



Ah But Your Land Is Beautiful

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Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful is set in the 1950s, the time of the Passive Resistance campaign, the Sophiatown removals, the emergence of the South African Liberal Party and the early stages of the Nationalist government in power. Revolving around the everyday experiences of a group of men and women whose lives reflect the human costs of maintaining a racially divided society, in a series of vivid and compelling episodes, Alan Paton examines what happens between people when such political events overtake their lives.

Ah But Your Land Is Beautiful Details

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Sean de la Rosa says

Paton's gracing words and style fill the pages of this book. It is a good reminder of how South Africa was in the 1950's. Maybe that is also its biggest criticism: it felt more like a history book than a work of fiction. There were a couple of intimate chapters where the problems of the characters take on real meaning and importance for the reader - Paton should have focused on this much more I think.

Cindy says

A brilliant book by the writer of 'Cry, the Beloved Country.' This one is told from varying viewpoints, sometimes as letters, sometimes as conversation, sometimes as newspaper reports, and from all sorts of narrator. There's the "Proud Christian Woman" who writes nasty letters to anyone she disapproves of. There's the Afrikaner civil servant who stick to the party line as long as possible. There's the Indian family whose daughter is making a stand against discrimination which will certainly end in violence.

I knew almost nothing about South African history before I read this book, but I found myself swept up in the story and the emotion. Compelling storytelling and a heartbreaking setting make this one of my top reads for the year.

CMB

Albert says

The cost of oppression, the tyranny of the mighty few, and the war cries of the oppressed majority: These are things that try our souls, and each of these shines true in this book. Even though it speaks of a time that has passed, even if the nation that survived those tumultuous times moves forwards towards the future, this book contains the stories and agonies of human lives, and that agony, that torment, those tortures ring true today.

The novel may 'bounce around' with a (in this reviewer's impression) cast of characters with many stories that happen to intertwine, but that only makes the novel even more poignant in its portrayal of the many faces in South African life under Apartheid.

Marilyn says

Excellent story and content about the beginning of apartheid. The only negative for me was that there were so many names and places that I had a hard time keeping everyone straight, and it was sometimes difficult to know who was speaking due to Paton's style of writing.

Maria says

It took me a really long time to finish this book. Parts of it were dry like a history book, and lacking the background that a history book would provide. So there were some pages I read without understanding a thing.

Then why did I bother finishing it? Well, I actually learned a lot about apartheid and South Africa. I read "Cry, the Beloved Country" in high school, so either I've forgotten what I learned then or 20 years of life experience have changed how I interpret what I learned. In any case, it was a book worth reading.

Written as a novel told from many perspectives, it does provide much insight. Unfortunately it took me a while to follow which character was which. I was particularly drawn to the story line of Prem Bodasingh, an Indian girl who participates in the Defiance Campaign by sitting in a white library. Even her parents, Mr. & Mrs. M. K. Bodasingh, were characters I wished I had gotten to know better. I might have enjoyed it more had the novel been their story.

I was interested to discover how the idea of apartheid was sold as a positive thing. From p. 86: "But his great theme was the Divine blessing of racial identity and racial separateness, and this was something to be treasured at all cost. It was as much a gift to black people as it was to white, and white Christians should help black Christians to treasure it."

And I was struck by some interesting advice that could be relevant today, on p. 150: "Prem, let me give you some good Hindu advice: if you even become a Christian, you must keep your eyes on Christ so that you will not get a chance to look at Christians."

I'd like to give this book more than 2 stars, but I would say "it was ok" more than "liked it".

Jennifer Wood says

I'm glad I read some of Paton's other novels - Too Late the Phalarope and Cry, the Beloved Country - before this, as this novel is less of a linear narrative (more like a collage of letters and loosely connected political/personal events) and speaks more intellectually of the politics of apartheid than those two others. I highly recommend this book, though, to those who would like to understand a little better the political and cultural climate of apartheid South Africa.

My favorite part of Paton's writing is his ability to craft stories of real, small-scale reconciliation in the midst of stubborn, large-scale injustice. I also appreciate that when his characters use their privilege to help the unprivileged, their acts of love and self-sacrifice never sprout from "white guilt" or a pressure from society to engage in "virtue-signaling," but rather from quiet humble hearts that recognize the dignity of their fellow man and risk whatever it takes to honor that dignity. These small stories give me hope and vision to care for my brothers and sisters in the midst of an unjust system, and to accept their care for me.

Tfischbach says

A really good book.... I feel like I understand the issue of apartheid in south africa much better, but its hard

to say i really enjoyed it because of the terrible things that happen... certainly not a light read, but i feel like a better person for having read it.

Will Corvin says

Beautiful prose, as always from Paton. He does an incredible job of juxtaposing the overwhelming determination of freedom fighters, the slow ascent toward humanity of some white South Africans, and the tenacious depravity of other whites. A great book that really makes one get a better sense of what it must have been like to live in 1950s South Africa from all angles.

Bonnie says

I think I liked this book more for its name. I did like it but must finish it only because I owed the library my first born child over how late this book was by the time I returned it and NEVER finished reading it. Ugh!

Abrya says

This novel was a very Well written novel. Each person was brought to life and vividly described. Although there were many characters presented which made the novel hard to keep up with, I enjoyed reading it. There was a tone about the book that kept me reading and enjoying every bit of it. It really inspires the reader to go for what he/ she believes like he did in the novel. You can't win if you don't fight seems to be the overall message that Alan Paton tried to convey.

Kimberly says

I'm disappointed to see that not too many people have read Alan Paton, because I have enjoyed now this book and "Cry the Beloved Country," and both give such insight into South Africa, its people, and race relations.

Fergie says

Alan Paton (as Ursula Hegi is in the present day) was a master of historical fiction. He wrote with a depth and honest truth that is worthy of our attention. With the same adept skills he used in his other novels, Paton teaches us about his South Africa...beautiful and flawed, real and intriguing. With a forthrightness to be admired, the courage in which he educates us through the words and actions of his characters is both appealing and compelling.

Paton reminds us that human nature, at its core, is flawed...often selfish, ignorant and self-righteous in its attitudes. But his books, despite these truths, offer glimmers of hope in the redemptive qualities of some of his characters. They also bravely share the hypocrisy that often reigns in the human condition through his more unlikable characters. This book actually deserves 3 1/2 stars but when I compare it to "Cry The

Beloved Country" (one of my all-time favorites) and "Too Late The Phalarope", this one somehow feels to me that it falls short than these mightier works.

Alan Paton's gift was in weaving history in compelling storytelling, beautifully inspiring his readers to consider the depths and complexities of the human spirit. In having us consider his South Africa, he has us consider the world. The American South can draw many parallels to the apartheid of this African nation. "Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful" is a novel worth reading. It compels the reader to contemplate the world through the eyes of both likable and disagreeable characters and for this it retains a sense of a well balanced read, deserving of one's time. FINISHED: 10-27-11

Derek Baldwin says

Ironically titled after the tourist's eternal saying when confronted with a country that's rotten to the core, but scenic. Not fantastically well written in some ways, but I'd rate it highly purely out of admiration for Alan Paton.

Peter says

This book is written in a kaleidoscopic, post modernist style whereby the story is told by various accounts that rotate around the events. It is told by different voices in a variety of formats; dialogues, private letters, press releases, newspaper reports and so on, where some characters were real life people and others are entirely fictional. Likewise, some events are historically accurate whilst others are not. It's a slightly challenging format that requires some attention in order to see the wood for the trees. I had to backtrack in order to orientate myself amongst those trees and see the big picture but, it's the trees that the story's stories are all about.

"Ah, but your land is beautiful" is a compensatory comment taken from the text; a panacea, an attempt at positivity in the face of abject inhumanity, suffering, division and injustice that form that bigger picture. It is set in 1950's South Africa where 'apartheid' is starting to become more militantly enforced and civil disobedience and protest are beginning to gain momentum; a self perpetuating, mutually assured cycle. The story is ostensibly about the repercussions of an oppressive system on the lives of it's people and, as with Mr Paton's other books, it's in the details of his characters lives that the story is played out and true changes take place; some people change allegiances, some shy away from the fight and still others become more entrenched. Yet, people of all sides are so affected by coming into contact with 'the other' or the reality of their suffering, that they are inspired to act out of defiance, deeper compassion or humanity, and simple, everyday acts sometimes become heroic within their context. (view spoiler) The real fight is not so much about resisting oppressive politics as not giving in to hate. A good book that only occasionally hits the same tones and tenderness of 'Cry, The Beloved Country'

Beth says

This fleshes out detail from the politics and policies that took place behind the scenes leading up to the turning moments when violence erupted against apartheid. They are detailed in snippets and ongoing pages often without paragraphs, strongly making one see the constant effort and hurt that it took as both blacks and whites eventually erupted.

I have been to the Apartheid Museum and the Hector Pieterse 1976 Soweto Uprising Memorial twice, and once to Lilliesleaf Farm where Nelson Mandela hid out so I should know more than I did. This book makes one feel the history.

But I couldn't take every dose of it. I had to skip batches of pages in order to endure. Additionally, often I could not tell whose voice I was reading unless I spent time figuring it out- the question was: Is this a black or a white voice.

An important a story!
