



# A Blade of Grass

*Lewis DeSoto*

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*A Blade of Grass* is a graceful and stunning epic set in 1970s South Africa, on a remote farm owned by a newly married couple. The mistress of the house, Marit, is young, recently orphaned, easily intimidated, and unaccustomed to rural life. With no close neighbors or friends, Marit feels isolated in the house while her husband works in the fields all day. Marit's displacement is soon echoed in the character of Tembi, the daughter of Marit's household maid, who assumes her mother's responsibilities in the farmhouse after she is hit by a car.

An encroaching civil war soon threatens the tranquility of the farm, and before long a plague of violence descends. Abandoned by the other farm workers, the care of the farm is now left to Marit and Tembi, who begin this new struggle for survival as equals, but whose unity is put to a devastating test.

DeSoto paints an unforgettable portrait of South Africa with tensions, both political and sexual, simmering underneath. Recalling J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* in his portrayal of Apartheid, DeSoto explodes onto the literary scene with a first novel of tremendous power and literary skill. His description of a terrifying world gone awry holds at its center a deep understanding of the patience of the land, and the enduring hope for renewal.

## A Blade of Grass Details

Date : Published September 7th 2004 by Ecco (first published 2003)

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Author : Lewis DeSoto

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## **From Reader Review A Blade of Grass for online ebook**

### **CynthiaA says**

There was so much to admire in this novel, I enjoyed it very much. Desoto uses language like a painter uses colour. Sparingly in some places, vibrantly in others, resulting in an image that shows us more than people, more than a place. Desoto creates beauty and violence, home and isolation, hope and despair, love and hatred, loyalty and abandonment, freedom and imprisonment. This story is set during the apartheid years of South Africa's history, and I admire the way Desoto avoids stereotypical depictions of both whites and blacks.

The fact that this is Desotos first novel makes it all the more admirable.

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### **Caleigh says**

What an incredibly depressing book! Beautifully written and yet almost painful to read, especially the last part where the heroine is literally dragging herself around half dead. I didn't particularly like any of the characters which didn't help motivate me to finish, but I did so for the sake of book club. I hope they appreciate it.

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### **Susan says**

I liked this book very much. It was a very descriptive story about apartheid and had wonderful descriptive scenes of South Africa. I found the story to be gripping and I had a lot of respect for the strength of the two women characters. I would have given it a 5 but I found some of the writing to be repetitive like I wanted to hand the author a Thesaurus. Words were often repeated several times in a few sentences. Overall though the book is an excellent read and I had a hard time putting it down. Although the ending is sad I think it relayed a truth about apartheid in that era in Africa.

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### **Pamela Pickering says**

I think the book's synopsis leads the reader to believe there is a little more "action" in the book than there really is. However don't let that deter you. The story is mainly one of a relationship between two women of two cultures. They are both dealing with the loss of a loved one and begin to work together to accomplish a shared goal. Not knowing much about South Africa (especially in the 1970's) I really appreciated the cultural and sociological aspects of this novel. The writing flows easily. I have loaned it to five women and all have made statements such as "I couldn't tear myself away from it". We all agreed that we did not care for the ending but also agreed that it probably could not have ended any other way (again, don't let this deter you from reading it). I should say that I loaned it to a male friend and he did not care for it or finish it (too much estrogen?).

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### **Doris says**

I'm giving it a 4.5, it wasn't a 5, but it wasn't a 4. It was good it kept me reading, it is a hard topic to write about I think. I don't know a lot about the situation in time for that country but I do have a small understanding and from my basic knowledge I think the author did a good job of showing the racial struggle of that time. In the book it portrayed both sides in a no win situation at the hands of the government but then..... there is Tembi and Marit.

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### **Jackie says**

The most literary book I have read in some time--it is a work of real craftsmanship. Lovely imagery, gorgeous use of language--this author could be studied as easily as any in our canon. The story is set on a small farm in South Africa during apartheid. The main characters are a young white woman named Marit, the owner of the farm, and a young black woman named Tembi. After a tragic occurrence, the two become friends and partners in running the farm. The book explores their sincere affection for one another, along with thier distrust. It also describes the violence and desolation of the period. The story is overwhelmingly sad, but very beautiful.

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### **Teresa Mills-clark says**

I found myself speed reading over paragraphs if not chapters, initially to reach the point where I felt engaged with the story. For that reason I rated the book 2 instead of 3. Even at the end, I couldn't muster the enthusiasm to rate the book any higher. If you wish to read about S. Africa as it carried itself into apartheid this story is written by a S African white male who was a young boy in that era, prior to emigrating to Canada and leaving it all behind. So, in that sense, the author was better able to put voice to some of the white characters.

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### **Allan Zimmerman says**

The author portrayed the tragic situation of South Africa through the eyes of the most vulnerable. Unfortunately, it is not a happy ending. While conciliation may have been possible between the women and maybe mutual benefit occurring for the two the world around them conspires to prevent this from happening. While most of the violence is perpetuated by males, I noticed that most of the Boer women weren't portrayed any more accommodating the the men. I prefer stories of fixable situations. However, stepping outside what I like does me good and helps me view the world as it is.

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### **Annalie says**

It's difficult for me to understand why this book was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, although I must

admit literature is not my area of expertise.

It's a bleak story, lurching from one disaster to the next with minimal respite. DeSoto writes in a strangely passionless tone of voice. The frequent Afrikaans phrases are at times so wrong that they hardly make sense (of course, that would only bother a person who speaks the language). Would it have been so hard to find somebody to edit?

It also annoyed me that the author didn't bother to check his facts, for instance the way in which a cicada makes its noise and how a baboon would attack a person. Usually I try to ignore such minor mistakes, but in this book there were just too many!

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### **Kari says**

A friend loaned me this book, saying she thought I'd enjoy it. I read up on its reviews and wasn't too impressed. Apparently the critics weren't fans.

I read all 389 pages in 24 hours. It was incredible and I could not put it down. Not perfect, but incredible. Having grown up in Africa (although not South Africa), the race relations aspect in this book fascinated me because I've never seen it put so well into words.

The story was a great balance of depth without pointlessness and action without making your head spin. I felt as if instead of reading this book, I absorbed it.

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### **Niki says**

Wow. This book is incredible. I won't give out any spoilers, but this story is about two women - one European, one native South African - whose lives intersect and become connected .. during the last throes of the rule of apartheid. Their relationship is not straight-forward, but complicated, and the author explores each woman's prejudices and fears in a manner that feels very honest and realistic. While these women need each other, love each other and depend on each other for their very survival, nonetheless their fears constantly threaten to break their relationship apart and shatter any hope that they will survive the many struggles that arise.

The story moves very quickly and is full of exciting drama, but it never feels melodramatic or false. The writing style is simple and straight-forward in terms of vocabulary, and yet touching and personal.

Can't say enough good things about it. Enjoyed it even more than Little Bee, which I read pretty recently and found to be a great read, also.

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### **MrsPL says**

While the writing in this book was beautiful, I didn't enjoy the story itself very much. I found the main character annoying, and by the end I felt like the inevitable was just being dragged out with twists and turns that seemed somewhat contrived.

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## **Ballinger Ballinger-Cole says**

Reading this book felt a little like taking a psychological test in a diversity workshop or college class on race. It is set in South Africa sometime in the 1970s on a farm owned by a young couple, Ben and Marit (British and Boer). Another central character in the book is Tembi, an African girl that eventually ends up as the "meid" in Ben and Marit's house.

Throughout the novel, you are put in situations as a reader where your instinctive feelings that may arise while reading this book may come in conflict with what you thought your feelings were (or would/should be) on the situation as a non-racist and good person. The book does this by taking Marit and Tembi and placing them into very similar situations. The question is, do your feelings and reactions change when it is Marit versus Tembi in any given situation?

For instance, a theme throughout the book is who rightly owns this land in South Africa. Is it the farmers that have bought the land, perhaps even family owned for generations? Is it the workers that actually toil so that the farm can produce? Is it the African people that have been removed from the land and placed instead in unhospitable land where nothing grows (forcing them to work in the mines, away from their families)? Are the animals really the only rightful owners of the land?

So, when you read the book and the white characters, Ben and Marit, own the land, do you feel all is right with the world, and cheer for them and their success on the farm? Do you instead hope that the understandably bitter, angry and sneaky African that manages the farm ends up with it? When at one point, Tembi the maid temporarily becomes the mistress of the house and Marit is locked out and sent to live in the staff huts, are you happy about this or bothered by it? When the war starts and white soliders show up, are you less scared for Marit and Tembi than when the black soldiers later show up? Do you have a feeling of relief for Marit when the white soldiers show up and a feeling of relief for Tembi when the black ones arrive? Does the color of a soldier's skin make any difference in the amount of havoc they will bring to females alone on a farm, whether black or white?

I appreciated *A Blade of Grass: A Novel* for the debate that it brought about in my own mind. There is a way you think you would behave had you been a part of history in South Africa. Then there are the feelings that come up while reading this book that make you wonder if you are being honest with yourself in imagining how upright and moral you would actually react to the situation if you were in it during that time and place. If you were a child born into a Boer or English family, would you really be able to understand this land is not yours and behave accordingly?

This isn't a book I would tell you to go out and get. However, if you find yourself in a used bookstore and it catches your eye, I would say pick it up and buy it, just like I did. It's worth a read. I must warn you, the dialogue is horrible in some parts -- not at all what I would imagine someone would really say in given situations!

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## **Jo-Ann Murphy says**

This was a violent long walk to nowhere. It had possibilities but they remain unrealized. Marit was weak and long suffering who never grew into her power. Tembi had strength but did not use it wisely. the relationship between the two was not fully developed and not as complex as it should have been. None of the male

characters had redeeming qualities. It did not live up to the promises on the book jacket. I don't feel I learned anything from reading it and don't think much will stick with me. It took a long time to engage me in the story. However, when it did we just seemed to move from tragedy to tragedy without the joy that could have made it a richer story. It certainly was not an uplifting read, in my opinion. It seems there could have been a whole lot more to this story in this setting during this era.

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## Lisa says

Sometimes when I finish a really good book I just can't wait to dash off to the computer and write my review – I want to tell everyone about it. That's the way I feel about *A Blade of Grass* by South African/Canadian author Lewis Desoto, which was longlisted for the Booker in 2004. It's a story of an inter-racial friendship set on the contested South African frontier in the 1970s during the apartheid era. I found it to be a remarkable debut novel that was engaging from the very beginning yet managed to raise complex issues about entitlement to land; about power and gender; and about the destructive effects of fear of The Other.

So you can imagine my surprise when I discovered from some outraged comments at GoodReads that some readers are very cross about this book. For some, there is too much lyrical description, for others too much symbolism. One who thought that *DeSoto also has absolutely no place in writing from a female perspective* took issue with the way that the peace and harmony of the relationship between two female protagonists, one Black, one White, is disrupted by jealousy over a man. Someone else is peeved about the stereotyping of *entrenched racist Afrikaners; ambivalent, hopeful Britishers; and resentful, disenfranchised Africans*. (There was also a reader who thought it was set during the Boer War. The less said about that the better, eh?) The novel copped a very negative review at 'Culture Wars' too.

I don't think that I read this novel uncritically, so I was relieved to see not only some positive views amongst the others at GR, but also this one from Quill and Quire. I felt that this novel rendered the complexities of living in a racist society with the respect it deserves. The two central characters, Marit and Tembi, are creatures of the society in which they grew up and their identities are forged by the black/white divide. Even when they transcend this divide, as Desoto renders it, they inevitably retain some habits of thought and behaviour, and in moments of crisis they revert to old habits even if intellectually and emotionally they reject them. This seems entirely realistic to me.

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2015/01/25/a-...>

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