



Ladysmith

Giles Foden

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The year is 1899, and Boer forces have surrounded the small South African town of Ladysmith. As shells and shrapnel rain down, British soldiers and townsfolk dig themselves in, waiting for rescue. But General Buller's relief column can't break through.

Ladysmith Details

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Author : Giles Foden

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Andrew says

This book tells the story of the siege of Ladysmith during the Boer war. I found the book quite slow and laborious to start off with, but after a bit of perseverance things do start to pick up. Following several different characters, the reader gets a good impression of what life was like during the siege; it was pretty grim for natives, colonists and soldiers alike. However because of the flitting back and forth between characters, it is hard to feel any particular connection to any of them.

What Ladysmith does do successfully is portray how the Boer war was the point of a changing tide from old Colonial values, and also how Britain's struggle to maintain control of southern Africa changed how we were perceived by other nations, eventually leading to the decline of the Empire.

Effie says

Interesting book by the author of the better known "The Last King of Scotland." I enjoyed learning about this episode of South Africa history and appreciated how he was able to tell the story from various perspectives.

Dana Jennings says

I started from a place of ignorance, knowing little about the Boer war in South Africa and so struggled to get traction with the story at the outset. Based in part on the letters of Foden's great-grandfather, a British trooper, the story is stunning and tender, romantic and tragic. Foden describes the conflict of 1899 from the voice of different recurring characters, a number of whom are nonfictional including Winston Churchill, Mahatma Ghandi and the renown British journalist, Henry Nevenison. The siege lasted 120 days and left the military and townspeople in Ladysmith in wretched circumstances.

Dick Gullickson says

Giles Foden does a masterful job of illuminating the foundation of South Africa by telling the story of the siege of the British Army at Ladysmith by the Boers in the Anglo-Boer war in 1899. Towns people, British soldiers, war correspondents, native Africans, and Boer family prisoners were surrounded and besieged by the Boer army for 118 days while a British column sent to the rescue struggled. Based on the letters home written by Foden's grandfather, "Ladysmith" does a capable job of telling everyone's story as the town of Ladysmith is reduced to rubble and the motley mix of the besieged die from starvation, disease, and constantly exploding shells. Foden succumbs to the temptation of every writer of historical novels to include famous historical figures in the story including war correspondent Winston Churchill and stretcher bearer Mahatma Gandhi. The roots of apartheid and modern day conflict and reconciliation are evident in this compelling and well written story.

Steve says

Mid 5. The seige and defence of Ladysmith was of momentous import to the preservation of the ideals which underpinned the British Empire, amidst a conflict which brutally exposed the outdated approach of the Crown's forces. Set in 1899, this novel brilliantly evokes the suffering of the beseiged as they await the relief column which is pinned down by Boer forces en route. Many reviewers appear to regard the multitude of characters confusing and revealing a lack of depth of characterisation, but in this reader's opinion, Foden has expertly crafted an engrossing and accurately detailed novel. Part of the novel's strengths is the fact that it is composed of snapshots of the distinct political and social forces which were converging as Victorian society brushed against the harsh realities of modernity - the war correspondents such as George Steevens facing censorship and the need to report news; the political awakening of the Zulus and Irish characters; the feminist attitudes displayed by Bella; but most of all the brief cameos by Churchill and Gandhi which determine their future trajectories. Historical fiction at its best.

D says

I wouldn't recommend Ladysmith. I found the lead up to the siege enjoyable. I enjoyed bouncing between narrators But a siege is boring and claustrophobic by its nature and therefore isn't particularly enjoyable to read about. The dialogue and characters are stilted. The plot is predictable. The novel is at its best when cycling through different characters and at its worst towards the end when it stalls on the main character and her romantic interests. Fodor also imposes modern attitudes on 19th century characters. Too many relationships seem completely improbable. The addition of historical characters like Churchill and Gandhi felt contrived but was better than the romance. The plots climax is utterly ridiculous but by that point you're so happy the siege is over you don't care. I wouldn't recommend it but it wasn't so bad I didn't finish it. I enjoyed learning more about the Boer war and wished that it rather than just the seige of ladysmith had been its focus.

Lily says

Ladysmith suffers from a complete lack of subtlety, both in the heavy-handed characterizations and the predictable relationships and plot. It earns its two stars for a.)the descriptions of siege conditions, which are horrifying and vivid, and b.)being engaging enough a read, if unsubstantial.

Peter Nowakowski says

this book was never boring and never exctining but easy to read and the end turned out to be very very good so i was a little surprised at how much i liked it.....

Eugene Lakinsky says

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Babak Fakhmzadeh says

Foden's second outing is not as enthralling as his first, the award winning *The Last King of Scotland*, but still a very interesting read. Set during the siege of Ladysmith, around the turn of the previous century, when the Boers, fighting the British aggressors, managed for almost four months, to squeeze the town nearly dry. The story, historical fiction, is roughly based on a series of letters from his great-grandfather which Foden accidentally stumbled upon. Whereas Foden, in *The Last King of Scotland*, had a character he could easily identify with, to the extent where the tale was so extremely credible, for most of the novel, that it made the reader wonder whether it was actually a biography, there isn't a central character in Ladysmith who matches Nicholas from *The Last King*. Perhaps the exception being one of the journalists, which Foden seems to be the most comfortable with. However, all the journalists are only minor characters in this story. As a result, the story feels less authentic, though it possibly is more so.

The last chapter is taken up with short chapters where characters surviving the siege recount particular experiences. One stretches 60 years ahead to the trial which included Nelson Mandela, after the Sharpeville Massacre. Perhaps a tad constructed, but also lending the story more urgency due to its link with the latter day apartheid state. One of the more urgent, as well as sobering, moments is Foden's description of the aftermath of the battle of Spion kop.

But, also, Foden implicitly admits his inability to help the reader understand war by reading about it: "No wonder that the armies of the past vanish, their ancient dead only rising from the furrows of buried time to laugh, invisibly, at the very pageants of memory by which we seek to summon them."

Churchill and Ghandi make an appearance.

Sue says

This is a fictionalized account of the actual siege of the town of Ladysmith from Nov 1899 to Feb 1900. I enjoy historical fiction partly because it gives me an opportunity to learn something in an enjoyable way. This did not meet that wish, however. I had a very hard time following it from the start - each chapter seemed to introduce new individuals with no sense of how they relate to those already part of the story. I get the idea that the residents were trying to make the best of the situation and move on with their lives in spite of the battle that raged around them, yet I couldn't seem to find a continuous thread throughout that brought it all together.

Alistair says

i enjoyed this story about the siege of ladysmith in the Boer war but in all honesty it is not great literature with the writer trying to get too many angles into the novel
a bit of adventure , a bit of politics with ghandi and churchill making cameo appearances , a bit of love and slap and tickle , a few noble natives , and a bit of cruelty . the horror of the siege is well described but the characters do not come to life and are flat
passed a few hours easily on a long flight .

Suzanne says

A chilling account of the Boer War Siege that narrates the horrors, heartbreak, courage, and choices made when a cataclysmic event occurs. Not for the faint of heart who wish a happy tale. It poses the eternal question of what is goodness or normalcy for survival in the face of catastrophe and chaos. Three cups of tea, straight and strong, no sugar or cream.

Yvonne says

Foden really brings the reality of the siege to life - the conditions, the action, drama, suffering, personal conflicts. I thoroughly enjoyed the book. I agree with The Times critic: It is at once a good adventure and a fascinating account of an historical period.

Marissa says

I loved Foden's Last King of Scotland so my expectations were a bit high. Interesting time period to learn about but I found the narrative difficult to follow so it wasn't the smoothest or most enjoyable read for me.
