

I REMEMBER KING KONG (THE BOXER)

"Imagine you are in an aeroplane at daybreak. You have just woken up to an announcement by the pilot that the long flight will be over in a few minutes. A city tilts towards you as the plane approaches. You catch a glimpse of street-lamps, cars silently torching the soft grey air, a few yellow windows in the massed darkness of buildings. You are filled with the presence of this place as it stirs from the intimacy of the night.

"Now imagine that this is not a city of the present but a city of the past, your past; a place you have not lived in for decades, and which you are returning to as if it continued to be all it had ever been before you left. The lights you see are your own glittering, floating memories, stretching across the years, some of them highly personal, others shared with neighbours, schoolmates, people you might never even have met but who once lived in the same place at the same time as you did."

I Remember King Kong (The Boxer) is a book of reminiscences which are, and could only be, South African in their timbre, scope and feeling. The memories, some personal and some public, will take you on a journey to a time and place that you'll savour long after you have put the book down.



9 781770 090323 97.00
1770090320 610 5
I REMEMBER KING KONG THE B
EB Cape Intl 11/06
9 781770 090323



Share your memories at www.jacana.co.za/iremember

I REMEMBER KING KONG (THE BOXER) DENIS HIRSON

I REMEMBER KING KONG (THE BOXER)



'Extraordinary. This is unlike anything I have ever read ... The form is as surprising as its subtle ability to tell the tales of our past'
Anjie Krog

DENIS HIRSON



“Sometimes life’s greatest treasures come in the flimsiest, most fleeting of forms. Take Denis Hirson’s superlative new memoir. Who would ever guess that beneath the Chappies bubblegum cover of this paperback lurks one of the most poetic and timeless odes to growing up in South Africa?”

– Alex Dodd, *Sunday Times*

“What will draw many readers to the book is its affectionate tone. White South Africans, or white children at any rate, had a baffled innocence mixed in with their violence and racism, and it is this innocence which Hirson salvages so well. *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)* is an entertaining and poignant testimony. For those (including the next generation of white kids) who are not sure if whites living under apartheid were human, this is a wonderful book to read.”

– Robert Berold, *The Sunday Independent*

“Just how did (Hirson) manage to sustain a high level of artistic engagement through a repetitive choice? Somewhere in (his) answer to this question will be the miracle of (this) achievement. Long before I got to the postscript, I participated in the miracle of literary incantation. My doubts having been swept away by the third page, I began to enjoy the recall of memory through instantaneous vignettes of my own. The ‘absence’ of narrative (gives) birth to numerous narratives that come at you like music.”

– Njabulo S. Ndebele

Contents

I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)	11
Postscript.....	133

I remember "French kissing" and figuring out it must have something to do with the tongue since there isn't anything else in the mouth except teeth.

– *Joe Brainard*

I remember that in Monopoly, the Avenue de Breteuil is green, the Avenue Henri-Martin is red, and the Avenue Mozart is orange.

– *Georges Perec*

There is so much Everything
that Nothing is hidden quite nicely.

– *Wisława Szymborska*

I remember the grown-up feeling of going to a cinema with plush carpeting and walls and curtains in front, and being shown to your seat by an usherette with a torch in the middle of the afternoon.

I remember coming out and wondering why it still seemed to be the middle of the afternoon.

I remember watching *Jailhouse Rock*, and thinking that Elvis Presley couldn't possibly be serious about all the hip movements and twisted faces he made when he sang.

I remember being at a party full of adult-sized ducktails with Brylcreemed quiffs, leather jackets and stove-pipe trousers. They went into the street to play a game of king stingers and threw the tennis ball as if they were trying to kill each other.

I remember the sting of a wet tennis ball.

I remember when tennis balls were fluffier, and almost white.

I remember the cinema ad for Brylcreem in which Gary Player ran his fingers through his hair.

I remember the sweet oily smell of Brylcreem in its squat glass jar.

I remember the commotion in a Yeoville bioscope during matinée performances.

I remember some cinemas in the middle of town: His Majesty's, The Empire and The Colosseum.

I remember Talent Contests.

I remember The Three Stooges, and the *Carry On* films.

I remember travelling into town on a cream and red double-decker bus, and the delay when the conductor had to reconnect the runners to the overhead lines, using a long bamboo rod that he slid out from the undercarriage.

I remember that to ring the bell for the next stop, you had to pull a leather cord that was loosely strung along the ceiling, and the panic of not being able to get the bell to ring at all.

I remember that the conductor had books of different coloured cardboard tickets and a shiny silver change distributor on a leather shoulder strap.

I remember worrying that, when I grew up, there wouldn't be boys of my generation who wanted to be bus conductors.

I remember the sign in the bus, at the foot of the stairs: DO NOT SPIT/MOENIE SPOEG NIE.

I remember boys going around saying "Moenie spoeg nie!" to each other with deep spooky voices and a gargle at the end of "spoeg".

I remember the black frieze just below the ceiling in our classroom: of the veld at night, with umbrella trees and girls carrying pots on their heads.

I remember a story our teacher read us at the end of the school day about a family that lived in a tree.

I remember walking around outside a classroom before a spelling test, trying to get the letters of the word "b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l" in the right order.

I remember that our teacher helped us with the spelling of the word "eye" by making it into a face on the board, with eyeballs in the "e's" and nostrils in the tail of the "y".

I remember the tune my father taught me to help string together the letters "M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i".

I remember our little orange Schonell spelling book.

I remember the board monitor going outside to beat a cloud of dust from the duster with a ruler.

I remember the Star Chart in our classroom.

I remember that our teacher's "pet" had to tease her hair with a comb she kept in the drawer of her desk.

I remember the girl who enticed me under a table in her bedroom and said she would show me hers if I showed her mine.

I remember that after the inspection she said she wouldn't marry me. Marriage wasn't what I had in mind, but this still came as a bit of a shock.

I remember five or six of us making hooting noises as we jumped from rock to rock in a big garden, holding jam tins filled with our own excrement, and broken aloe leaves with gluey magical juice.

I remember the ticklish feeling of a songololo in the palm of my hand, and the bitter smell it left behind.

I remember going on walks and collecting as many different kinds of leaves as possible, pressing them in a book, and later wondering what to do with them.

I remember the soapy-clean smell of our primary school library.

I remember asking our Grade Two teacher if there was a special kind of chalk for drawing dotted lines.

I remember the small red and yellow cardboard counters with black dots on them, divided in two like the face of a domino, that we used in arithmetic.

I remember the sudden, urgent need to pee in the middle of an arithmetic test.

I remember my father telling me not to "pee like a horse" into the water at the bottom of the toilet bowl.

I remember that our teacher poured plaster of Paris into a saucer, and that I drew a fish in it while it was still wet.

I remember miniature groceries; also, miniature drinks of everything from Coca-Cola to Johnny Walker whisky. You could get them from people who had been on planes.

I remember that the night the first sputnik flew over Johannesburg I went outside to try and spot it. Every star seemed to be moving.

I remember Yuri Gagarin's face framed by the visor of his helmet, and Laika the dog sitting in a space capsule.

I remember thinking that gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand by someone who had accidentally kicked over a solid, gleaming nugget of gold.

I remember that two or three people all called George discovered gold. The surname of one of them was Honiball.

I remember one of the old boundary stones of Johannesburg, on Boundary Road near the Louis Botha Avenue fire station.

I remember my great aunt Essie's blue Fiat, with black rubber running boards and headlamps sticking out on either side of the hood.

I remember sitting at the back while she was driving down Louis Botha Avenue, humming elaborate home-made tunes to her and then announcing that they were by Bach.

I remember her unfailing response: "Mhmm".

I remember the mixed smell of talcum powder, deep red lipstick, fresh hairdo and Rothman's blue cigarette smoke.

I remember stockings with seams down the back, shiny black leather bags, problems with piles, and cigarette holders with gold glitter stuck in the plastic.

I remember that we picked up a black woman who was walking down Louis Botha Avenue during a bus strike. She was wearing a blanket and eating a banana.

I remember second-class bus-stops, overloaded dirty green Putco buses, and the bus-stop song in *King Kong*.

I remember that, as far as I was concerned, the original *King Kong* was about a champion township boxer who killed the woman he loved and later committed suicide by drowning himself in a dam at Diepkloof prison. The film, about an ape who kidnapped a beautiful woman, must have stolen its name from the play.

I remember thinking that the policemen surrounding King Kong when he sang to the judge about wanting to die were not actors at all.

I remember when Lucky the gangster came on and the whole stage went red.

I remember that Miriam Makeba was "discovered" by Harry Belafonte.

I remember Lemmy Special's penny-whistle music.

I remember boys singing "Oh dear, what should I do, my baby's black and I'm feeling blue"; also "Baby won't you hold my gland" and "There she was just awalkin' down the street singin' 'Do what Daddy did to Mommy to get me'."

I remember choosing the first girl I said I was in love with when everyone had to have someone to be in love with. There was no question of actually mentioning this to *her*.

I remember how, afterwards, everything about her – her smile, her freckles, her achievements in netball and her big pink house behind its split-pole fence – made her mysterious and completely unattainable.

I remember that there was always a hole in my school jacket pocket, and that sweets came unstuck from the lining encrusted with dirt and navy blue fluff.

I remember the sinking, creamy feeling of melted chocolate in a pocket.

I remember square chewy pink sweets that you could buy at the tuck-shop, and a girl who always used to chew them till her tongue looked sharp and phosphorescent.

I remember that in winter at primary school we were served a ladleful of hot chocolate in an aluminium mug; in summer there were little glass bottles of cold milk and orange juice.

I remember standing in a group at nursery school singing "The farmer's in the dell" and waiting to be chosen.

I remember standing alone in an old cracked tennis court with honeysuckle coming in through the fence and the sun pouring down while I played with sticky, bush-tailed heads of grass.

I remember that a mouse bit a hole through my brown cardboard nursery-school case.

I remember all of us lying outside during rest period, on blue canvas stretchers under the trees.

I remember the Nelsrust Dairy delivery-man, and the tinkle of milk bottles in his bicycle carrier.

I remember twirling a silver milk-bottle top across a room.

I remember balsa-wood gliders. Some of them had propellers that wound up with an elastic band.

I remember making kites using dowel sticks and green twine, brightly coloured tissue paper, and long tails tied with ribbons of cloth from my grandmother's sewing basket.

I remember the crisp sound of wind in tissue paper, and the two awful, inevitable moments when the kite either nosedived to the ground or was fatally mauled by the branches of a tree.

I remember pear-shaped wooden spinning tops with pointed metal noses, and boys trying to peg a top by whirling a second one down against it.

I remember plastic flying saucers, and perilous expeditions onto neighbours' roofs to retrieve them.

I remember the Superman programme on the radio that began with a voice saying "Up, up, and awaaaaay!"

I remember the little square paper label stuck onto the crust of Atlas bread-loaves, with a picture of Atlas bearing the world on his back.

I remember slices of Atlas bread shining with butter, peanut butter, Marmite and syrup.

I remember never understanding why, if the world was really spinning, we didn't fall off. Then my father gave me a demonstration, a ball cupped in his hand and his arm bowling fast without the ball flying loose. After that I understood even less.

I remember that Reg Park was Mr. Universe, and that later he made Bokkie garden furniture.

I remember the pills against polio that we queued up for in our school hall. They were large, white and sickly sweet, with a very soft centre.

I remember fathers projecting films during birthdays onto glistening grainy white pull-down screens, and the moment before the film when everyone stuck their hands in the light-beam of the projector.