



Fractured Lives

Reviewed by **Michelle Louw**

Toni Strasburg
Modjaji Books: Athlone, 2013. 311 pp

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Toni Strasburg's memoir is an account of her experiences in the frontline states during the height of apartheid. *Fractured Lives*

is part autobiography, part social commentary, and part historical account of her journey in the changing landscape of southern Africa during the 1980s and

1990s. Strasburg offers a female perspective on the traditionally male-dominated subject of war, in particular her account of the meaning of war for women and children.

Strasburg was born in South Africa to politically active parents, Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, who were leaders in the Communist Party of South Africa. Soon after the Rivonia trial, the newly married Strasburg and her family moved to Britain as exiles. As she was not



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allowed to return to her beloved country, she joined her filmmaker husband, Ivan Strasburg, to do something for “the struggle”. Strasburg and other filmmakers shared the belief that the films they made about what was occurring in the frontline states would make a difference by exposing the realities that innocent people faced in wartime conditions.

She is very frank about the difficulties in obtaining funding for documentaries, as well as filming in war-torn countries and the hardships of being a female director commanding an all-male film crew. Working in Angola, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, they faced such conditions as having no water, bad food or none at all, no toilets, no electricity, unreliable transport, excessive heat, the threat of ambush, and working with local minders. Strasburg highlights the constant battle that occurred when trying to realise the vision she had for her films in the *confusão* of those times.

What comes across throughout the book is the sense

of helplessness she and her crew felt in the wake of what they witnessed: the suffering and starvation of people, the forced separation of families, the loss of limbs to landmines, the rape of women and children, and the destruction and neglect of cities. However, the final chapters of *Fractured Lives* contemplate opportunities for new beginnings in these countries as well as the power of survival of those who were affected.

Strasburg’s return to South Africa after nearly three decades in exile is very poignant. Her joy at the fall of the apartheid government was quickly dampened by the sadness she felt when she discovered that the home she had dreamt about for years no longer existed. For Toni Strasburg, home will forever lie somewhere else. *Fractured Lives* is an amazing book that will be valuable to anyone interested in understanding the impact of apartheid destabilisation in southern Africa and the hardships and frustrations of being a wartime filmmaker.



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