



Inside the Belly of the Beast: The REAL Bosasa Story

Angelo Agrizzi

as told to Phillipa Mitchell

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Review by Moira Levy

The immediate value of this book lies in the summary guide it provides of the Bosasa debacle. We have learned of so many shocking exposés of corruption and state capture that it is difficult to keep track of who stole what from whom, how much, and for whose benefit. This is a record of two decades of mindblowing greed, fraud, bribery, elaborate money laundering schemes and corruption at the highest levels of government, not only of the Bosasa company, but of the extensive empire run by its Chief Executive Officer and at times cult leader, Gavin Watson.

This is a good book, but it was very likely mostly written as a response to the earlier Bosasa expose by Adriaan Basson: *Blessed by Bosasa: Inside Gavin Watson's State Capture Cult*. (Jonathan Ball Publishers: SA, 2019), and perhaps not necessarily as Agrizzi's heartfelt need to 'fess up.

It's the story of a personal vendetta by one man, Angelo Agrizzi, against another, Gavin Watson, who in hindsight proved to be his nemesis – but more of that later.

First the reader has to get through about a third of the book which is a rambling tale about Agrizzi himself.

The poor son of an even poorer Italian immigrant, Agrizzi gave up his schooling in pursuit of ... well, money. The book expects us to be impressed, even admire this self-made businessman who started out cleaning pots in a bakery for 75c an hour, and who eventually became Chief Operating Officer of the vast, multi-faceted Bosasa empire. Much of this book is about Agrizzi, Mr Nice Guy, the company's COO, and the colourful characters he encounters at Bosasa. He is the family man, the man who cares for his staff, who works really hard and does his very best, but he just can't escape that mean bully, Gavin Watson. Well, that is what we are told.

The book is subtitled "The REAL Bosasa Story" (emphasis by the publisher, not this reviewer), but we have much to read before we reach the REAL stuff. The book tells of the impressive growth of Bosasa, through bigger and better contracts – mainly in security and catering services. The result of honest, hard work? That's seems to be what is suggested. Early on in the story we only encounter suggestions about those on the periphery of Bosasa who did the "running around" for the Watsons.

Only later do we get to read of fascinating subplots concerning extremely lucrative bribes – Watson preferred to call them deals – as this multi-headed corporate hydra grew, from roots primarily in mass catering and security control for the prison service (including the notorious Lindela Repatriation Centre for "illegal migrants"). The multi-million rand deals are not spelt out in any detail; we are left knowing only that there is lots we don't know. And, it is implied, Agrizzi was often also in the dark.

He knew only that "bags containing between ten and twenty thousand rands, were being dished out to the key players ... the union had Gavin wrapped around their fingers. The total amount going out to Correctional Services staff must have been in the region of R3 million a month ... Some months the amounts were higher than others – especially when I wasn't around to check up on them," writes Agrizzi.

This brave whistleblower risked all to expose what he apparently didn't really know much about. All along, the real culprit – that would be Watson – was giving loads of cash to political figures, with whom he, Agrizzi, had no direct dealings. ➤

In the book Agrizzi concedes that “we were no different from the politicians we were bribing. The multi-million rand contracts that were handed to us afforded us a lifestyle that was well beyond the reach of the average white-collar worker. And so I was torn,” he writes. Reading the book, you have to feel for him. He writes that walking away would have meant an end to the Ferraris, designer clothing, exotic travel, “bulging bank accounts.” What was he to do?

We know from the evidence presented to the state capture inquiry that it took a near-death experience (in the form of a “pancake-sized” tumour in his heart), followed by emergency surgery and four days in a coma, for Agrizzi to comprehend the wickedness of his ways. We also read that the first thing he heard as he emerged from the coma was a shocking truth. His master and mentor, Watson, after taking one look at his long-term COO surrounded by tubes and drips, in ICU and hooked up to a ventilator, had wasted no time in attempting to move in on Agrizzi’s R30 million death and dread disease cover.

It was then – and only then when we are only 50 pages from the end of this more than 300-page life story, that “the stark reality of Gavin’s true motives [began] sinking in”. It has taken the reader, and apparently took Agrizzi himself, a rather long time to realise the extent of the criminality we are talking about.

But he got there at last, and it led to some tough thinking. “What kind of legacy was I leaving my children and grandchildren if I sat back and watched South Africa being plundered even further, knowing that I’d reaped the benefits without making reparations.”

Ah ha! Agrizzi had seen the light! Also, the company was R50 million in the red by then and Gavin had let it slip that he planned to liquidate. Agrizzi did what he had to do. He parted company with Gavin Watson, and the rest of the book is about how he sets about mobilising staff to join him in “extricating ourselves out of the web of Bosasa”.

We learn that Agrizzi had secretly been amassing evidence against Watson for some years – more life insurance, perhaps – and that he had

convinced a colleague to carry out “a plan fraught with danger”, using his cell phone to film Watson in a company vault, counting out millions of rands of cash to be distributed to regular beneficiaries. (You can see this video at www.itbotb.com).

That footage woke everybody. Agrizzi was probably hoping that this would be his get out of jail free card. But this triumphant moment in his appearance before judge Zondo was not what he had hoped for. Instead our hero was jailed, and after a short stint in jail suffered a heart attack and was rushed to ICU. As we all know, Watson died, under curious circumstances in a car crash, days before he was due to testify at an inquiry regarding his tax.

The Agrizzi story has an unhappy ending – but read it anyway, if for no other reason than it casts some light on the shady criminal parallel system of governance that places our constitutional democracy at great risk.

And also to appreciate the extraordinary skills of Agrizzi’s ghost writer, Phillipa Mitchell, who writes a real page turner! **NA**