



# Unforgiven

## Face to face with my father's killer

By Liz McGregor

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Review by Moira Levy

In sharing her experience of coming face to face with the man who brutally murdered her father, accomplished author and former journalist Liz McGregor brings us, her readers, “face to face” with multiple terrifying truths about the reality of South Africa.

This book is a deeply personal account of one person's grief, fear and trauma and the unanswered questions that dogged her for years, despite enduring days of harrowing court proceedings during the murder trial. At the same time, it is an important public record, a sociological narrative that very clearly lays bare the roots and consequences of South Africa's brutal history.

McGregor – but let's call her Liz, readers will feel a closeness after reading her courageous account – Liz takes us into her confidence. She recounts her surreal experience in some detail: the early morning call from her brother that left her reeling, unbelieving and hyperventilating; the frantic drive to her father's house in Tulbagh outside Cape Town “wailing out loud like a mad

woman,” missing the turnoff because she was “barely able to see through my tears”, and then the first thing she saw when she was eventually allowed into the house – “his glasses. They are on the kitchen counter and the lenses are coated in blood.”

The journalist in Liz emerges repeatedly throughout the book. The context for this brutal murder is provided in full and woven very skilfully into what on the face of it is an intimate account of one person coming to terms with the violent death of her father. But it is much more than that.

There are statistics: “In 2008, the year my father died, 18,479 others were murdered in South Africa”. There is history in the form of a succinct spin through South Africa's colonial past; the emergence of the mining industry and its insatiable appetite for cheap black labour; the pass laws. It's brief of course, but this is not a history book. Relevant facts about the past are cleverly fitted into a story about the present-day crime epidemic.

There is also a well-researched and fascinating note on the emergence in the early 20th century

of the Ninevites, a militarised band of highway robbers who operated in the Witwatersrand gold belt. Its relevance to the book? Their leader was Nongoloza Mathebula who later, in prison, established what became the notorious Numbers gangs – the 26s, 27s and 28s – which today dominate many of South Africa's prisons.

Cecil Thomas, the man sentenced to an effective 30 years in jail for the murder of Robin McGregor, was a member of the 28s. This gang, and another known as The Firm, was behind the killing and controlled the eventual outcome revealed in the book.

Not for want of trying, Liz finds it impossible to get on with her life after the murder. She is wracked by persistent, highly tuned anxiety, which is barely alleviated by loads of prescribed medication. She hardly ever leaves her flat. She cannot sleep. She paces night after night. A random violent act of thuggery against her, which is recounted in the book, understandably exacerbates this. “I am at the bottom of a deep pit, scrabbling around in the dark for a way out.”

That is, until one day Liz finds her >>

way out. She writes “I have always written my way out of despair ... I will explore my father’s life and Thomas’s, to the point where they collided.” This takes her first to north-eastern Scotland and the house of her forebears. Later, fortified by an antidepressant, she resolutely gets a print-out of the court record, all its hundreds of pages, and starts her exploration of Cecil Thomas’s life.

Born in a remote part of the Karoo, the youngest of 10 children, he grew up in an isolated Western Cape settlement known as Saron, not far from Tulbagh where the murder took place. Her research turns up a profile of an unlikely gangster and murderer. Largely absent are the predictable violent background and disrupted upbringing. His family is supportive, very concerned about him and devastated by the crime. They had high hopes for Thomas who has a tertiary qualification, the first in his family to reach that level of education.

Liz tracked his life, from Saron to Pollsmoor, then Brandvlei prison and finally to Voorberg correctional centre, and she didn’t stop there.

She decided she needed to “meet him, understand him and thus to demystify him”.

We, the readers, who have gone this far with her in the book, can understand what brought her to this point. Besides she has questions:

What actually happened that night in the house that her father had only just finished renovating? Why did Thomas decide to kill a complete stranger? Was he alone – something the judge remained unsure of – or were there shadowy accomplices who could still be at large?

And if he had come only to steal her father’s safes, why did Thomas brutally torture and eventually kill Robin McGregor, a man well known for his damning research into the concentration of wealth in South Africa, which he published in his own publication, *Who Owns Whom?* and who was well-known in anti-apartheid circles as what the judge called in his summing up “an activist for the underprivileged”.

Liz knew she had to confront Cecil Thomas and put her questions to him. She applied for a prison visit – and immediately found herself up against protracted prison bureaucracy and bungling. Making her painstaking way through the prison system she met good cops and bad cops who appeared to be tight with the gang leaders in prison. No surprises there.

She also risked attracting the attention of the all-pervasive, all-seeing gang underworld who almost certainly knew who she was and what she was up to, and who had to, at all costs, control its own public image and the information

that got out about its operations.

Here’s what Liz has to say about the gangs: “The Numbers gangs seem to me to be the distillation of the dehumanisation cemented into the foundations of the modern South Africa ... They have merged with the ever-growing criminal underworld. They poison the democratic order by corrupting policemen and warders and politicians. They turn townships into war zones and don’t care about the innocents caught in the crossfire.”

So was it worth it? Liz is emphatic. “Yes,” she writes. “It meant shining a light into a dark corner where monsters lurked and finding a frightened and damaged man.

“[It] gave me an insight into the underground forces that fracture and warp our country. But it also frightened me. Because now I see how the violence upon which this country was founded still permeates and defines it.”

This book reads like a thriller, but clearly it is not. It is a serious commentary on South African society. Without being a spoiler, this reviewer can reveal that unlike the average thriller this story does not end neatly, with all loose ends tied.

But that’s the point – this book is not telling a story, it is revealing the messy, harsh lived reality of many South Africans – and Liz makes exactly that point, without flinching or holding back. **NA**