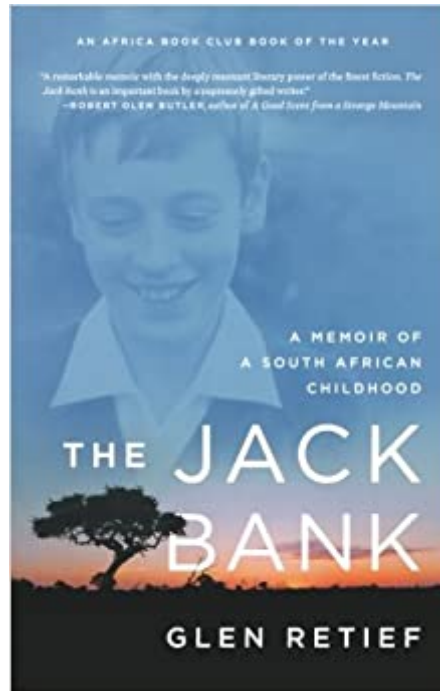




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# The Jack Bank: A Memoir Of A South African Childhood



## Synopsis

An extraordinary, literary memoir from a gay white South African, coming of age at the end of apartheid in the late 1970s. Glen Retief's childhood was at once recognizably ordinary--and brutally unusual. Raised in the middle of a game preserve where his father worked, Retief's warm nuclear family was a preserve of its own, against chaotic forces just outside its borders: a childhood friend whose uncle led a death squad, while his cultured grandfather quoted Shakespeare at barbecues and abused Glen's sister in an antique-filled, tobacco-scented living room. But it was when Retief was sent to boarding school, that he was truly exposed to human cruelty and frailty. When the prefects were caught torturing younger boys, they invented "the jack bank," where underclassmen could save beatings, earn interest on their deposits, and draw on them later to atone for their supposed infractions. Retief writes movingly of the complicated emotions and politics in this punitive all-male world, and of how he navigated them, even as he began to realize that his sexuality was different than his peers'.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Probing deeply into his personal memories of race, sexuality, and violence, creative writing instructor Retief has written a potent, evocative chronicle of his youth, coming-of-age at the end of apartheid in the 1980s. He looks back at his comfortable idyllic childhood as a white South African in the unspoiled wilderness of Kruger National Park, where his father worked: "Could the Garden of Eden have been so abundant?" Leaving paradise, brutal reality came at age 12 when he was sent to a boarding school and experienced the torture of "jacks," sexually tinged hazings by 17-year-old dormitory prefects swinging cricket bats onto bare buttocks. Recalling the "jack bank" —

cricket bat strikes deposited in advance of future wrongs. Retief reflects: "Put immature adolescents in charge of younger boys' discipline, and the results will tend to be Abu Ghraib, the Milgram and Stanford experiments, Lord of the Flies." Yet when he became a prefect, he found "enormous, surprising pleasure" delivering jacks himself. Because of the jack bank, "Sexuality is something dark and secret, imbued with shame and violence." During university years in Cape Town, he tried to confront his "one continuing dilemma: my erotic attraction to boys." The jack bank abuse remained "life's defining moment" for Retief, aware of its psychological scars as he moved toward adulthood, connected with the gay scene, and headed, eventually, for America. (Apr.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"If it only dealt with his growing up against the harrowing backdrop of apartheid in a South African military boarding school trained to groom privileged white boys like him into violent oppressors -- "jacks" are beatings -- then this would be a riveting memoir; the fact that Retief was also coming of age as a gay man makes it essential reading."

Advocate "Probing deeply into his personal memories of race, sexuality, and violence, creative writing instructor Retief has written a potent, evocative chronicle of his youth." Publishers Weekly "Eloquent...readers everywhere will be caught by the searing detail about family, friendship, sex and love."

Booklist "Visceral and emotionally complex--an impressive first book."

Kirkus Reviews "Retief has a subtle, skillful style." Library Journal "A remarkable memoir with the deeply resonant literary power of the finest fiction.

The Jack Bank is an important book by a supremely gifted writer.

Robert Olen Butler, author of A Good Scent from A Strange Mountain "This moving book explores the emotions of exile as few stories about leaving home do. A passionate writer, Retief turns his tale from attachment to detachment, from letting go to letting be."

Thomas Larson, author of The Saddest Music Ever Written "One of those books that you never forget and never stop talking about. Retief belongs in the pantheon of white African writers Alexandra Fuller, Peter Godwin, Coetzee, and Gordimer."

Bob Shacochis, National Book Award-winning author of The Immaculate Invasion "Glen Retief's Jack Bank is a transgressive, harrowing and illuminating work of literary art. In a language marked by a brutal childhood in the last years of the apartheid regime, and with uncommon wisdom, Retief's epiphanic narrative draws us into regions of cultural importance beyond the scope of traditional memoir. Thus,

he changes what we imagine this genre to be, allowing it to become something truer. —  
Carolyn Forché, author of *The Country Between Us* — “This is one of the best memoirs I’ve read in years, difficult to put down, riveting... Unforgettable, lyrical and beautifully written... I’ll be shocked if *The Jack Bank* is not hailed as one of the best books of the year. —  
Steve Yarbrough, author of *Safe from the Neighbors*

The importance of this work is summed up in Retief’s final sentence: If no one is ever willing to break the protective silence of what goes on in individual lives, how will we ever learn from each other? (Retief, 270.) The story of growing up on a game reserve in South Africa would be enough to enthrall readers, but Retief goes further. Through stories of boarding school, activist work, and the turbulence of tribal wars, Mr. Retief weaves a tale that is at once incredible and approachable. The timeline progresses at a pace that keeps the reader engaged and covers the details that create a rich array of Mr. Retief’s early life. Most impressive is Mr. Retief’s command of language. Retief’s sublime prose creates pictures in the mind and has a texture that cradles the reader. His word choice is near perfection; I found myself wanting to read every word. Mixed with the fine writing style is vocabulary from Mr. Retief’s life in South Africa. This is not, as one might think, distracting. Mr. Retief aptly creates a context for the vocabulary used; the reader need not struggle for understanding. In addition, Mr. Retief has taken the time to provide a thorough glossary. *The Jack Bank* should become a required text for understanding the intersections of privilege, for a fine example of memoir, for a depiction of the damage violence can cause, and for understanding how we move forward through those things that threaten to destroy our world.

I didn’t know that I wanted to learn about South Africa until I started reading this book. The story is gripping and personal, but yet still largely universal with its exploration of friendship, family, finding one’s true self, sexuality, and listening for a professional calling. Retief’s experience is complicated by its setting: bloody, turbulent times in South Africa’s 1980s and 90s. It is dramatic without being sensational, honest and intimate without being emotionally pornographic, warm and emotional without being nauseating. Retief writes with an honesty and a prose so beautiful that it’s hard to put down. I know that sounds cliché but in this case it is so. I tend to read before sleeping, but I had to stop doing it after the first night when my brain kept swirling, thinking about the story and wondering what would happen next. I had to finish it in the afternoon to give my brain time to process. I would recommend this book to anyone. I plan to recommend it to my gay uncle, my straight uncles, my teenage little sister, my cousins and friends of both sexes. I may send it to my dad for his birthday.

(Shh! Don't tell him).Sidenote: There is a glossary at the back of the book that defines the slang and foreign words. I've seen some comments elsewhere that the reader stopped to look words up online, and, well, that wasn't necessary.

When I first picked up *The Jack Bank*, I wondered what I, as a straight woman, would get out of it. But from the first page the writing was beautiful and I couldn't put it down--and I'm so glad I kept reading because I got so much out of it. The first chapter, in which the author is struggling to try to be like the other Afrikaner boys reminded me of similar experiences growing up as a cultural outsider in the U.S. Later, his sister's story tore at my heart, as did the recurring theme of victims and their victimizers and the complex relationship between them. Finally, the book made me think a lot about how violent acts haunt people long after the bruises are gone, and most of all, what it takes to heal from them. Highly recommended.

From the description of the book I initially expected that this memoir would be mostly about the author's experience dealing with the trauma of abuse in boarding school. Once I got into it I realized that it covered many other themes and topics--racism, privilege, dealing with charming yet dangerous family members, South African history, an exploration of social distinctions between Afrikaans and English South Africans, wild life, gay liberation, and friendship. The prose is gorgeous--rich, visual, emotive. The story grabbed and pulled me. And then I thought and thought and thought for days about what I read. I often pass on books after I read them, but I am holding onto this one to reread it in a few months.

I like to purchase and read my kindle choice in interest blocks.I selected this book under the heading of "boarding school memoirs" . As such it was a less than impressive piece, a little muddled, featuring a brutal actions by an obvious sadist. But as a first-person historical account of the end of apartheid in South Africa, it was very interesting. The details of the "coming out of the closet" sub-story seems unnecessary and over-long , but the excellent sensory description of the South African scenery and the vivid events of the uprisings save the story and make it a worthwhile read.

I enjoyed *The Jack Bank*, but what made it less than excellent was, for me, the unevenness of the writing. There were many places in the book where I was mesmerized by what was happening to the author, as well as his responses and insights to things. But in some sections, the prose was

awkward and the narrative just did not flow very well. It's still worth reading, but you may feel kicked out of the reading experience from time to time. A better editor would have helped to make it a better book.

Glen Retief is a beautiful writer with a haunting story. His memoir of growing up white and gay in apartheid South Africa is a compelling coming-of-age tale that also gives a glimpse of the culture that fostered political brutality. It's also just a good read.

Glen Retief shares with us in vivid detail, the trials of growing up gay against a background of entitlement garnered through apartheid. The reality that he is now a happily married man is nothing short of breathtaking.

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