

Q&A

With Sahm Venter and Sello Hatang

There has been a number of Nelson Mandela quotation books published. Why was there a need for this official book of quotations?

We are constantly asked by members of the public from around the world to authenticate quotations which made us realise that a lot of material exists with either incorrect quotations or quotations that are not even by Nelson Mandela. We decided to provide a resource to assist people with such queries.

Why now?

We have been collecting quotations for a few years and after we had completed our work on Mandela's book *Conversations with Myself*, we had the time to compile the quotes into book form.

Where were the quotes sourced from, and how have you been able to verify them?

The quotes come from a very wide range of sources – letters from 1948, speeches from 1953, interviews from 1961, court testimony from 1962, conversations, notebooks and diaries. We consulted letters that were in Mandela's handwriting or had been signed by him and which were obviously his own words. Audio and video sources were also consulted.

Did you come across material where the provenance and date were difficult to determine?

We did occasionally come across such material which was mainly from video interviews which had been compiled in such a way that this information had been left omitted.

In such instances all efforts were made to source the detail, although we haven't always been successful.

In the course of researching for the book, have you discovered anything about Nelson Mandela that you didn't already know?

Rather than discovering new information about Mandela, our awareness deepened about how his principles and values remained consistent over the years; the simple way in which he communicates complex ideas was reinforced through our research; and of course his legendary sense of humour continues to surprise and inspire.

Was it difficult to categorise and organise the material?

The categories just seemed to grow and grow from what we initially expected. We had thought that we might be able to get away with a few broad categories but that was not to be. In the end we decided on more than 300 categories in order to help the reader locate specific quotations. Each category has been further organised chronologically from earliest to latest in an attempt to demonstrate any change in position.

Is there something particular about the way Mandela writes, speaks and corresponds that demonstrates his qualities as an exceptional leader and man?

Whether he was talking to ordinary people or presidents and royalty, he made each individual feel valued. He often highlights the importance of characteristics such as taking criticism and listening. We were struck as much by the gravitas of his words as by their simplicity.

Is there any quote or quotes that speak to you as the most revealing of his character?

“We pass through this world but once and the opportunities you miss will never be available to you again.” This cuts right through to his essence, a man who is wise and pragmatic and seemed to have lived his whole life by this maxim. If he had not seen the opportunities to fight apartheid he would not have become involved; if he had not seen the opportunity for the armed struggle he would not have faced the death sentence and ultimately been sentenced to life in prison. If he had not taken the opportunity he foresaw after South Africa’s then Minister of Justice visited him in hospital in November 1985, he would never have started talking to the apartheid regime about eventual negotiations with the African National Congress.

What’s your favourite quote in the book and why?

Sello Hatang: “It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die.” For me it’s a lesson in how we sometimes take words for granted. It teaches me to listen before I speak which is something I don’t do often enough.

Sahm Venter: “I believe in surrounding myself with strong characters who will tell me when I am wrong.” This quote speaks to Madiba’s insistence on listening to criticism. It’s a valuable lesson to all of us, particularly those in positions of power.

Are there plans to expand, update and revise the material?

We are planning an enhanced e-book which will contain audio and video of some of the quotes. We are also considering different editions of the print version. Whilst this collection of quotations is comprehensive, it is not exhaustive and as we continue to come across material we will certainly include it in future editions.

Where are the royalties of this book going to?

Royalties from sales of the book accrue to Nelson Mandela who has donated 40% to the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory in order for us to continue our work. Mandela launched the Centre of Memory as a non profit organisation in 2004 to conduct research, collect and make accessible information about his life and times. This book, as well as *Conversations with Myself* and *Nelson Mandela: The Authorised Comic Book* are examples of the work of the Centre of Memory.