

Nelson Mandela;
Conversations with Myself
(Macmillan) PQ Blackwell Ltd

NELSON Mandela loves the music of Tracy Chapman and the Manhattan Brothers. He learned how to use a gun in Oujda, Morocco, and met the Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia in the 1960s. He told Ruth First to go to hell after a row about a case he had lost, then kissed and made up soon after. He mourned the loss of “a sister in arms” when she was assassinated by the apartheid regime in 1962.

The presentation of Nelson Mandela “unplugged” in this remarkable collection, mined from his personal archive, unseen diary entries, notebooks, letters, speeches and private papers, reveals a man of greater wit; a man far snappier, sharper and more astute than the image projected by the icon of reconciliation who steered South Africa’s first years of democracy.

Mandela has waited a long time to let the curtain down. “I didn’t want to be presented in a way that omits the dark spots in my life,” he writes, describing the process of telling his story in *Long Walk to Freedom*, his autobiography. He was prevented from correcting “the distortions” propagated by his first wife, Evelyn Mase, because Walter Sisulu and others said, ‘you are not only telling your life, we want you to be a model around which we are going to build our organisation’.”

Mandela, we learn, was not seeking that position, just as he does not want this autobiography to become “a blueprint on which others may model their lives”.

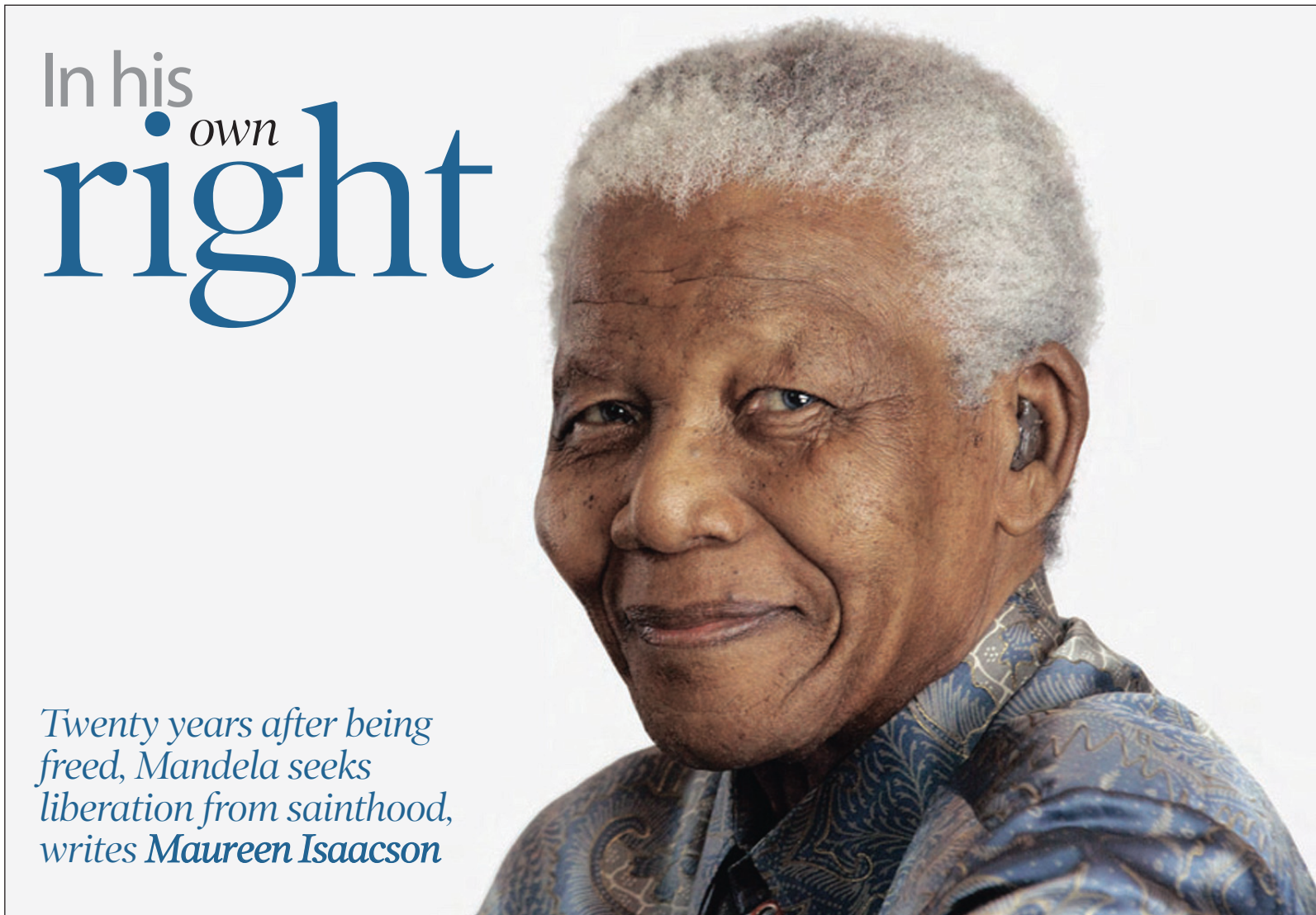
Twenty years after his release from his 27-year incarceration, he seeks liberation from the burden of sainthood. Verne Harris, project leader at the Centre for Memory and Dialogue at the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF), says that some time ago, Mandela instructed the team not to protect him.

In the process of unearthing the real Mandela, senior foundation researcher Sahm Venter transcribed more than 70 hours of his conversation with Ahmed Kathrada, his comrade and fellow prisoner; and with Richard Stengel, Time magazine’s editor in chief, who facilitated the writing of *Long Walk to Freedom*. The conversations recorded become spicy as Mandela enters the global stage. Mandela tells Stengel that Queen Elizabeth is “a fine lady”; Graca Machel, on a first meeting, is “a very impressive woman and a striking personality”; Castro is “a striking chap”, he is very humble, so is the pope: “Gee whiz, the Pope is also an outstanding person”.

Tim Couzens, the academic and writer who is responsible for the structuring of the “conversations” into a format similar to the *Meditations* of the 2nd century AD Roman ruler, Marcus Aurelius, says that Venter suggested the book be called *Gee whiz*.

This would surely be an unsuitable title for a book laden with truths we are hearing for the first time – from the horse’s mouth.

“My installation as the country’s first democratically elected president was imposed on me much against my advice.” At 76, Mandela wanted to serve without holding any position in the organisation or government. The liberation of the country gave meaning to his life, but he is sorely moved by the message of his daughter Zindzi’s poem, *A Tree Was Chopped Down*, which



In Conversations with Myself, Nelson Mandela reveals the the essence of his life story that his portrayal as a political icon has suppressed.

tells of the separation of her family from her father. He mourned his beloved mother in 1968 and grieved for his son, Thembekile, who died in a motor accident in 1969, at the age of 24. He was devastated that he was not allowed to bury them at their respective funerals.

“My heart bled when I realised I could not be present at the graveside,” he wrote to Nolasapho Irene Mkwai on November 19, 1969, of Thembekile’s funeral.

“I feel as if I have been soaked in gall, every part of my flesh, bloodstream, bone and soul, so bitter am I to be completely powerless to help you in the rough ordeals that you are going through,” he wrote to Winnie on August 1, 1970.

Such searing prose makes it difficult not to resist sanctifying the man, who writes that in prison he “worried deeply” about the “false image” of sainthood that was cast on him as he became the world’s longest-serving prisoner: “I was never one, [a saint] even as a sinner who keeps on trying.”

Does he protest too much? Who but a saint would willingly clean a fellow prisoner’s night bucket? Some sermons, which are chosen precisely because they do not look like sermons, are persuasive: we should become better people, there is hope. The quasi-religious undertones, the repudiation of the halo – these appeal to Barack Obama, the US president who is no stranger to the church, and who has claimed Mandela as a role model anyway.

In his foreword to the book, Obama writes, “it is precisely those imperfections that should inspire every one of us”.

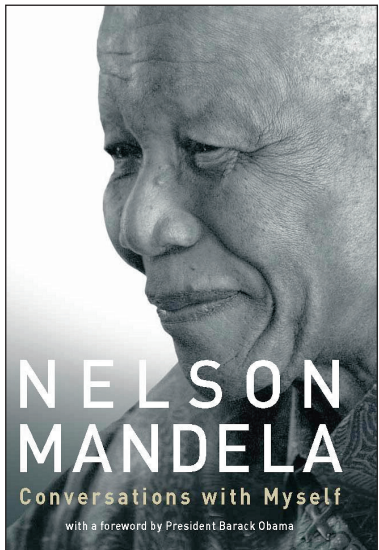
Mandela hid his weaknesses behind arrogance, and embraced “errors and indiscretions” as a country boy, he writes. “Only armchair politicians are immune from committing mistakes. Errors are inherent in political action.”

The conversations present him as a work-in-progress. Marxism was a foreign ideology for him at the beginning of his career. He was

[initially] interested in the social aspect of the Communist Party.

“To see whites who were totally divested of colour consciousness was... a new experience to me.”

Memory, which plays out the past in surprising detail, is a saviour during those long years of incarceration. Reliving his epic life history, he hankers for “that enchanting veld” of his childhood. Later a self-confessed “rabble-rouser” caught up in revolutionary fervour, a townsman, lawyer and man of courage, which he downplays, he still made no apparent



striking errors of moral judgment. *Conversations* presents a fastidious man who made notes – of the prices of the objects that filled his shrunken world, from Nescafe to Fray Bentos, and of everything from newspaper reports of Winnie Mandela’s gagging to the healing power of primrose oil.

Set against the ostensibly “ordinary” details of Mandela’s ascetic life are the dreams of unconsummated desire for Winnie. He had understood that she might have met other men when he chose to go underground. “Those issues are not

material to me,” he tells Stengel. For him it was sufficient “that she is loyal to me, supports me and comes to visit me and writes to me”. He said, “When I went to prison, I resigned myself to the fact that I had no opportunity for sexual expression and I could deal with that.”

Mandela tells Kathrada that contrary to news reports, he “condemned unreservedly” Winnie’s April 1986 “necklace speech”, which endorsed the burning of alleged police informers and called for comrades to liberate the country “with our boxes of matches and our necklaces”. Mandela’s diary entry of August 20, 1986, reveals that he tuned into Reverend Peter Storey’s broadcast sermon on forgiveness. He noted sermons on other matters ecclesiastical.

An earlier letter to his daughter, Maki Mandela, dated March 27, 1977, recalls his baptism in the Methodist church.

“I have my own beliefs... It is far better to keep religious beliefs to yourself. You may unconsciously offend a lot of people by trying to sell them ideas they regard as unscientific and pure fiction.”

This is not to say that *Conversations* is an attempt to out Mandela as a holy roller, rather that the essence of Nelson Mandela, no longer a holy cow, is accessible between the lines.

Leaders are divided into two categories, he writes, “the inconsistent, whose actions cannot be predicted, who agree today on a [matter] and repudiate it the following day; and the consistent, who have a sense of humour, a vision”.

He tells Stengel that his statement from prison that nationalisation was still ANC policy set off a furious reaction from South African business. “American businessmen put pressure on us to reconsider the question of nationalisation. The decisive moment came at the World Economic Forum in Davos. I realised if we wanted investment, we would have to review nationalisation, without removing

it altogether from our policy.”

He had come a long way, the man who was among the founders of the ANC Youth League in 1944 and who was tasked with setting up Umkhonto we Sizwe. He had gone into the ANC with open eyes.

An early diary entry noted: “The presence in one organisation of various classes and social groups with conflicting long-term interests that may collide at crucial moments brings its own train of conflicts.”

It was, however, this association with the ANC that helped him “to crawl out of the prejudice of my youth and to accept all people as equals”.

Sello Hatang, a spokesman at the NMF, stresses that the repudiation of sainthood, present throughout the book, is deliberate. Yet it takes an advanced man to reveal so openly the flaws in the glass – and a man of foresight to even attempt to pre-empt a possible posthumous backlash. His five-year administration is yet to be judged; his political legacy scrutinized.

During the long years that took their toll on the health of Mandela’s eyes, his heels, his legs, his heart, his lungs, he came to understand how certain “experiences had eaten too deeply” into his soul.

He has earned the right not to be called a saint. He tells Kathrada that he was not beyond the sin of temptation – while he was in prison he was offered in the region of half a million rand for his story by one publication, and later R1 million by another.

“You know, to be poor is a terrible thing.” On June 9, 1980, his financial “balance” was R41.44. On August 19, 1987, he weighed 67kg. His diary entry reveals that he acquired a new razor blade.

Of course we know that he did not accept the cash, just as he says he would not kill an impala in the Kruger Park. Such an act would be “murder” in the eyes of the man whose moral example has made of him a universal beacon.