

BOOK REVIEW

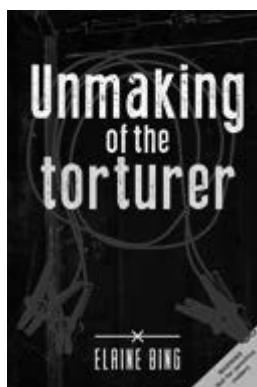
***Unmaking of the Torturer* by Elaine Bing**

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Elaine Bing is a counseling psychologist who works with both victims and perpetrators of torture in a private practice, and this line of work eventually became an academic interest for her. *Unmaking of the Torturer* is a book based on Bing's doctoral thesis exploring the stories of policemen who tortured and killed during the apartheid era, but who now find themselves on the wrong side of the law, and fighting their own sort of torture in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder, identity issues, alcoholism and the resulting interpersonal conflicts. In this book, Bing sheds light on the "other" victims of apartheid – the perpetrators.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section provides background on the political context in which these stories are situated, and is followed by three sections which cover the stories of the policemen, Martin, Harold and Theuns. The fifth section considers the impact the three men's stories had on Bing.

The first section, *The Political and Economic Environment: South Africa, 1976–1994*, is concise, accurate and informative. The author avoided the temptation to

be long-winded by giving an extensive account of South African history, yet she manages to capture the essence and to contextualize the stories that follow.

The second through to the fourth sections of the book are the interviews with the three perpetrators of torture. The stories of the three men become progressively worse: The first story, that of Martin, is tame compared to the second and third stories. Bing covers the background of each of the men briefly with regard to their upbringing and parents, their police training, the time spent in the police force and the torture they committed, and then also the aftermath and their path to healing. What is striking about each of their accounts is the fact that all of them had honourable intentions when entering the police, with no foreboding of the path their lives were about to take. Bing does a great job of awakening empathy and understanding within the reader, while still being very vocal about her disgust at some of the stories. Throughout the book I enjoyed her moments of self-reflection and honesty. She also includes some of the paintings she did as her own form of therapeutic release as a consequence of her work with these men, which gives great insight into her own mind and emotions.

In the fifth and final section Bing reflects on her relationship, as a psychotherapist, with the perpetrators. She also reflects on the power that she is given through their openness and the responsibility that came with these men sharing their stories.

The book is written in a way that adapts to its reader. It has enough psychological theory to make it interesting to the psychology professional, but it is also a book that will appeal to non-psychologists. An appendix at the back of the book provides explanations of the disorders and other psychological terminology used throughout the book. The only critique of *Unmaking of the Torturer* is that, at times, I experienced the book to be slightly fragmented, as if taken directly from larger sections in her doctoral thesis, compromising the flow of the book.

I found it to be rather difficult to review this book for several reasons. First, the content of the book can be regarded as shocking. It is extremely graphic in terms of the torture committed, but also in terms of the emotions the men display during the interviews. It is emotionally taxing to read this book for more than 20 minutes at a time and it is definitely not the kind of book you want to read for a relaxing evening at home. At times I had to remind myself that this is real, and not a gruesome novel. Second, as South Africans, we tend to demonize the perpetrators of torture during apartheid, and we rarely hear about their personal journeys and how they ended up as the perpetrators. This book is enlightening as it states a side of the story that I personally have never heard. The training the perpetrators received toward becoming 'killing-machines' is a shocking reality and one cannot help but develop some level of empathy with them. Third, being the daughter, granddaughter and niece of men that were in the police force during the apartheid regime, this book hit close to home. It was a personal journey as much as it was a journey with the men in the book.

I can highly recommend this book to each and every South African. These stories will on some level be relevant to each person with a South African heritage. Now, in July 2014, with the controversial decision about Eugene de Kock's parole and the South African public focusing on the victims, it may be good to read the book to gain insight about the "other side" of torture. International readers will also appreciate the book as it explains human nature that can be applied to any nation and any perpetration of torture, especially in a time where there is spotlight on events at Guantanamo Bay. This book is of great relevance.

Title: *Unmaking of the Torturer*
Author: Elaine Bing
Publication Date: 2013
Publisher: Lapa Publishers
ISBN: 9780799360158

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



Carien du Plessis obtained her BA degree in Psychology and Criminology from the University of Pretoria in 2011, after which she completed her Honours Degree in Psychology at Stellenbosch University. She is currently completing her MA Research Consultation degree at Unisa. Her research interests include health and pain, scholarly development and prison issues.