

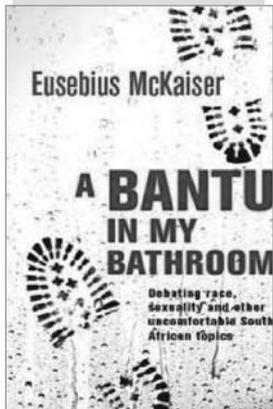
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BOOK REVIEW

A Bantu in my bathroom by Eusebius McKaiser

*Eusebius McKaiser's rise as a political commentator and media personality has been meteoric. In his first book, *A Bantu in my bathroom!*, McKaiser stretches his intellectual legs, presenting fifteen previously unpublished essays on a range of political and social issues in South Africa. Unpublished in part because — as McKaiser notes in his introduction — no major South African publication currently carries long form journalism. This is a regrettable fact, and hopefully this book will be successful enough to demonstrate to publishers that there is a taste for longer, more thoughtful pieces as part of our media mix. (Indeed, the launch in September of *Mampoor.co.za*, a website selling long form pieces individually, may already indicate growing recognition of the format.)*



A BANTU IN MY
BATHROOM

by Eusebius McKaiser

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The essays are organised into three sections: *Race, Sexuality and Culture*. In the first, McKaiser tackles issues as diverse as the moral defensibility of affirmative action, and whether it is racist to specify the race of one's tenant in an advertisement. In *Sexuality*, he asks whether gay people ought to come out, despite the ease of avoiding the issue altogether. He probes the violent nature of our nation's sexual psyche, and muses on whether one ought to try to change unusual sexual preferences, originating in unpleasant or otherwise regrettable events. The final section, *Culture*, addresses why South Africans strive for a national identity, and whether it is useful. McKaiser uses the recent "Spear" debacle as the site of a discussion of the role of the artist in society.

These and many other issues fill this engaging, challenging book. Each essay presents an argument, though it is rare that they are structured as linearly as a newspaper opinion piece. Instead, McKaiser uses anecdotes, from his personal life and work as a talk show host, to introduce and contextualise each position he advances.

It is an easy book to read, and so one might be tempted to read it quickly. Jonathan Jansen, in his foreword, boasts *en passant* of reading it in an hour. To do so would, I think, be to miss the point of the book's casual tone and accessible style. I most enjoyed it in the days after my first read, when I carried it around as a conversation piece. I read McKaiser's four race vignettes to my mother while accompanying her on a quick grocery run. These simple, unadorned tales of ordinary interactions are immediately recognisable from our experience, and prompt a kind of reflective scrutiny that we ordinarily so easily avoid.

This is one of the book's major successes. McKaiser's use of anecdotes will, I believe, succeed in bypassing the knee-jerk defensiveness that so often stymies difficult discussion on race in South Africa. His personal reflections avoid the boring blame game of so many casual comments on race, and instead elicit empathy and *déjà vu*. The results are some fascinating and deep discussions.

Bantu is a deeply personal book. Reading it made me feel I had grown closer to McKaiser (who, I should admit now, is a friend and former colleague). It made me want to meet his father, to witness their touching, revitalised relationship. It made me wonder how the very public revelation of his childhood sexual abuse at the hands of a cousin would affect his family. How would his father react? These questions swirl together with the difficult questions the book asked of me as a reader, making for an experience at once intellectual and emotional.

When you begin reading *Bantu*, it is clear that McKaiser went to some length to make the book as accessible and un-intimidating as possible. He uses “dude” in almost every instance of reported speech. He is “soooo” excited. Almost every page is littered with exclamation marks, and I found it implausible that every second quoted question ends with an interrobang. Ordinary speech is surely not so forceful!?

McKaiser is upfront about what informs this stylistic decision:

“How do you write so that a professor can be challenged by the complexity and nuances of your ideas and, yet, stylistically, you get those ideas out there in such a way that someone with little formal education can also engage with you?”

The answer, he believes, is to write as he has.

“I have drawn a lot on anecdotes and personal stories, and have tried to drop academic jargon and style...”

Notwithstanding my appreciation for the anecdotal lead-ins to his essays – and perhaps my penchant for and appreciation of more academic writing is at fault here – I found the casual language of some essays grating. In my view, McKaiser strays from accessible writing to a level of informality best reserved for one’s Facebook page. Much as it is frustrating to receive serious communication written in SMS speak, it is distracting to encounter hokey informality in the middle of an essay on a deep and important issue.

While he has discarded the formal jargon of academic philosophy, he cannot quite rid himself of the trained philosopher’s need for specificity.

Writing accessibly is an admirable aim. Accessibility, however, is not the same thing as informality.

It is furthermore clear to me that this informality achieves its aim. I believe McKaiser has misdiagnosed the problem with academic writing, or at least gone for a partial remedy that might turn out to be no remedy at all. While he has discarded the formal jargon of academic philosophy, he cannot quite rid himself of the trained philosopher’s need for specificity. Each topic he addresses must be extensively caveated and clarified, so that the issue under inspection is tightly defined and easily distinguishable from associated phenomena. This, as any student of philosophy will tell you, is simply necessary when trying to tackle arguments about complex issues. Everyday debates are plagued with confusing equivocations and disagreements over basic premises.

The downside to this laudable argumentative practice is that the crucial passages of his essays are still densely written and occasionally obtuse. It is not clear that the Average Joe (or Siphon from Qunu, as McKaiser is fond of saying) will break through this complex edifice to the argumentative core of his writing. If this is the case, then the stylistic gymnastics will have been for naught.

Perhaps these stylistic quibbles are petty, but I'm driven to share my frustrations precisely because McKaiser is clearly in full control of his style. The elegant piece entitled "Cape Town's dirty little secrets" has a haunting, almost elegiac tone. It is a masterful piece of writing, evoking in me sympathy, self-reflection and that rare feeling of full and profound agreement which stems from a synergy of pathos and logos.

McKaiser tells of his discomfort in Cape Town, where the unrelenting presence of coloured poverty recalls his background and, crucially, resonates with a future that could easily have been his own. Reading it, I found myself reflecting on my own heightened discomfort in the face of white beggars. Through the cruelties of our past, someone of my race and background is unlikely to experience the hardships that face many black South Africans. This fact is inescapable, and underlies my interactions with black beggars. I feel guilt (historical and just middle class); I feel shame; I feel awkward about my unearned wealth.

But white beggars, armed with miscellaneous bits of car tubing, ready with a tall tales of being stranded Capetonians, evoke something deeper. There, but for the grace of God, go I. It is a sensation easy to avoid as a middle class white South African, shielded by many layers of insulation from poverty and confronting the poor. The triumph of the *Race* section of *Bantu* is in these moments of connection.

McKaiser admits that *Bantu* is an exercise in stylistic experimentation. In large part, I judge this experiment a failure. But, as my physics lecturers were at pains to impress upon our eighteen-year-old minds, negative results are useful in experimentation. They guide us to new, fruitful ground. To my mind, McKaiser should discard the contrived, barroom-chat approach typified by the book's first essay and focus his future explorations on the measured tone he achieves in the final section, *Culture*. A mixed bag of topics, this section contains the book's stylistic and analytic apogee.

The poor rhino, of Primedia/LeadSA fame, is cheekily used as a pretext for introducing deeper questions around the moral status of animals. McKaiser presents a clear, persuasive argument against granting animals equal moral consideration to humans. The piece is easy to read, without excessive chumminess. It concludes with a postscript on cultural aspects of attachment to animals that is funny and insightful. I found myself drawn in while reading it, despite my initial scepticism about the likelihood that the topic would make for an interesting essay.

Autobiographical, argumentative, and touching, *A Bantu in my bathroom!* is a welcome addition to the sadly small genre of South African social analysis. It offers subtle, textured analysis on a range of topics close to the heart of our public discourse. Hopefully, it is only the beginning of a fruitful new stage in McKaiser's writing career. We need more writers who think carefully not just about their subjects, but about how best to engage ordinary South Africans in reasoned, critical debate.