

# Essay

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> **Joan Hetteema**

*Independent language practitioner and author.*  
joanhetteema9@gmail.com

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## *How *Jacaranda rain – a South African story* was written*

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This is an account of how I went about writing my book of memoirs *Jacaranda rain – a South African story*. Several things immediately spring to mind when asked, ‘How did you go about writing this book?’ Foremost is the fact that every person who picks up a pen, stylus, writing implement, or lays their hands on a typewriter or computer no doubt has a different and personal reason, aim, or motive for doing so.

What is it that induces that irresistible feeling that drags at one’s gut, nagging one to produce the words that hopefully reflect what we want to express? Is it because we are trying to restore order to the chaos of life around us?

In my case, since I can remember, words have held a magical fascination ... long before I learnt to read, words held me spellbound as my father read me fairy tales. My father even nicknamed me ‘Rumpelstilchen’ as I would chant the word and dance around an imaginary fire for some time after the story had ended.

One day in 2005, I was beset by an urge that would not go away. I wanted to tell a story about my city, Pretoria, and the magic it has always wrapped around me like a soft blanket. I once left it for nearly four years to live in Cape Town but felt ill at ease for that entire time and only felt my heartache ease once I returned.

I also wanted to tell the world about South Africa and its one-of-a-kind texture and colour, its diversity of people and attitudes expressed in a million different forms and reflected in such a way that people’s utterances and actions were like the multi-coloured reflections off the large crystal ball that hung from the ceiling in the vast ballroom at the Pretoria City Hall.

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I had no clear idea how I would do this until I sat down and began to type from the invisible dictaphone chattering inside my head, telling stories and conjuring up images that flashed past across the inner eye. Then, the only problem was making sense of what was happening to me by conforming to the rules of language and writing sentences that hopefully would convey what I was experiencing.

I wanted to reveal the mysterious atmosphere lurking around past memories. The silence surrounding the actors as they begin to play their parts in the story is always there, as is the myriad ways the scene could unfold.

And then it begins, and they say their say and do their thing, and the story unfolds of its own accord. In this instance, it was quite easy as everything that takes place in *Jacaranda Rain* actually occurred. All I had to do was access to my memory bank and describe the events and words. But even so, it takes time and to revivify it requires providing an authentic and vital backdrop with scents, colours, and sounds. Thus, as in real life, there are all the sounds and sights of the world around to describe and, of course, the words the actors say, as well as anything in the scene that would give it distinction.

I also wanted to tell a little about South Africa's atmosphere and feel. While there are so many misconceptions in the minds of people abroad, we also often find narrow insight on the part of some people who live on its very soil and have been inculcated with ideas that miss the mark of authenticity.

Thus, the theme emerged: South Africa, its huge diversity of people, and their participation in war ... my relatives in particular. I then narrowed down events to what happened to the people in Pretoria and chose Jacarandas as a metaphor for the passage of time. The personal story relating events and episodes in my life is a metaphor for the universal themes of love and loss that everyone goes through.

The method chosen was brevity as far as possible. Having been involved with journalism as a reporter myself, the necessity to tell a story as succinctly as possible was ingrained in me. I have been told that twenty minutes is as long as someone can truly concentrate particularly when listening to a speech or talk. Having been subjected to many speeches during my career, I have heard many long-winded ones. So, the book unfolded with the use of short sentences and paragraphs and understating rather than over-describing a scene or event or using sensationalism.

The opening paragraphs of Chapter One – 'War, war, war' of *Jacaranda Rain* sets the scene with Pretoria and its jacarandas (Hetteema 2019).

Row upon row of purple jacarandas and a matching carpet underfoot is the backdrop of my psyche born and bred in Pretoria, the academic and diplomatic heartbeat of South Africa's north. It is the gateway to the Bushveld and the throbbing heart of Africa where the big cats roar in the dark, elephants trumpet among Mopani trees camouflaged by dappled shade, crocodiles sun themselves on river banks and jackals yodel at the moon.

In August, the jacaranda trees dismally scatter their teeny leaves amid swirls of dust as the wind keens through bare branches and the nostrils ache from the cold, dry air. Then suddenly on a happy day at the end of September, the first bell-shaped blossoms appear and all at once, rain or no, the jacarandas burst into full bloom and the blossoms vie with the blue of the sky in intensity.

Thus, much of my story is intricately woven into the fabric of early spring and the coming of the jacarandas ... they are a symbol of all the joys, sorrows and nostalgia, intertwined with life in all its phases almost too complex to express.

The story then moves on to illustrate the conflicts the country has been involved in, such as the Anglo-Boer War and World War II (Hetteema 2019).

I had often wondered about why I felt so different. Perhaps it was because of the cocktail mix of nationalities that was my background like that of most South Africans. My mother was Afrikaans, having been born in the Free State in 1900, during the fierce struggle of the Anglo-Boer War between the descendants of Van Riebeeck's Dutch Settlers of 1652 and British who then ruled the country. My paternal grandfather aged two, arrived in East London with his parents as part of the German settlers who came to the country in 1858.

And another piece about World War II (Hetteema 2019):

Now it was the early 1940s with South Africa locked in a fierce struggle between those who supported participation in the war against Hitler and those who did not. I overheard my parents talking about the Mondriaan family next door, who belonged to the Ossewa Brandwag or OB. So I asked my father what this was.

'They are a group of people who do not want the people of South Africa to fight against Hitler because they think he is right,' my father said.

'Do you think this is right?' I asked my cousin, Lilian. 'What if Hitler wins and something happens to Raymond and your brother, Victor who are fighting up North?'

For once she agreed with me and said we should pull up their carrots

as punishment for their support of Hitler.

Thus the next day we crept through the hedge separating our property from that of the Mondriaans and pulled out some of their carrots and ate them. We felt we were entitled to do this. Somehow we felt we were participating in the War and supporting Lilian's brother, Victor and our cousin, Raymond.

The reality of death, dying and loss also is depicted in the book and is a prominent theme in relation to South Africa and on a personal level. Here are some instances of the themes of death and loss (Hetteema 2019).

The concept of people dying was a terrifying one since I had seen the film *San Francisco* with my mother. Scores of people in evening dress wearing fur coats and feather boas were running from a plush theatre as a huge chandelier fell from the ceiling crushing many of them. Others fell into deep crevasses as the earth cracked open beneath their feet. The film depicted the violent earthquake that shook San Francisco in the early 1900s.

'Don't look and put your hands over your ears,' my mother said but the sound penetrated and I kept peeping between my fingers and all the while the crashing chords of Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto thundered along.

Another quote is about Raymond, who was a fighter pilot with the RAF flying Spitfires and Hurricanes (Hetteema 2019):

The day Raymond left Pretoria we drove him to the station in our little two-toned Morris Eight that my father had named Bunny Morris because the headlamps and grille with bumpers on either side resembled a rabbit, I thought.

It was late September 1941 and the jacarandas lining the streets in serried ranks were coming into bloom. The scent of jasmine filled the air in our garden while flowering peach and plum leaned against the wall. Raymond bounded down the stairs energetically, smart in his impeccable uniform and I smelled his hair cream and after shave as he passed me....

To this day I can see his bright face as he picked me up and held me above his head ... 'I'll see you soon, my angel,' he whispered as a lock of glossy dark hair fell on his forehead.

I knew this was the last time I would see Raymond and I know my mother also knew this. She did not say so but I always lived inside her heart. There were no secrets between us.

These quotes are all from Chapter One, which sets the scene. Thus, the story took on a life of its own and became like a hall of mirrors within me as an event triggered other memories, and the chapters simply poured out. I started in April 2005 and finished within six months. However, it was inevitable that I would do some rewriting and juggling.

In the meantime, life on an everyday level continued, with little regard for the fact that I was writing a book and working at a different level of consciousness.

The *modus operandi* was to write a chapter and then just wait for the inspiration for the next one. I know many writers plan the whole thing beforehand. That does not work for me. The only part that involved my right brain was accessing the memories and using the rules of language to structure the writing (apart from using a computer and so forth). For the rest it was pure serendipity about what particulars found their way onto a page.

I rewrote and juggled for a few years and wrote the last chapter in 2018 when many in the country were euphoric as Cyril Ramaphosa became president of South Africa. The book was launched in 2019.

I wrote and finished another book, *Under the powder-puff tree*, in 2021. I am busy reviewing it and writing another book set in 1915 loosely based on my mother's life, which began in 1900 in the Free State. It jumps between 1915 and onwards to 1955 in Pretoria and then back to Senekal in the Free State and events during the Anglo-Boer War when my grandmother died, and my grandfather was a prisoner of war in Bermuda. It is called *Beneath the boughs*, inspired by the poem of the great Irish poet W.B. Yeats called *The Rose*.

Beneath the boughs of love and hate,  
I see Eternal beauty wandering on her way.

## About the author

Joan Hetteema (néé Thies) was born in Pretoria, the city of jacarandas. After matriculating from Pretoria High School for Girls, she majored in Latin and English and also studied isiZulu and Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria and later completed a postgraduate degree in English Language and Literature at the University of South Africa and Troisième Degré at l'Alliance Française. Among others, she worked as a journalist for *The Pretoria News*, as a writer for the magazine *Panorama* at the Information Services

Department, in various public relations departments such as at the Performing Arts Council Transvaal, at the CSIR, editing its scientific journal *Scientiae* and scientific papers, as a scriptwriter and producer of audio-visual programmes, and later as head of media liaison at the University of Pretoria. She currently edits dissertations for students at the various South African universities and is writing another book.

## References

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