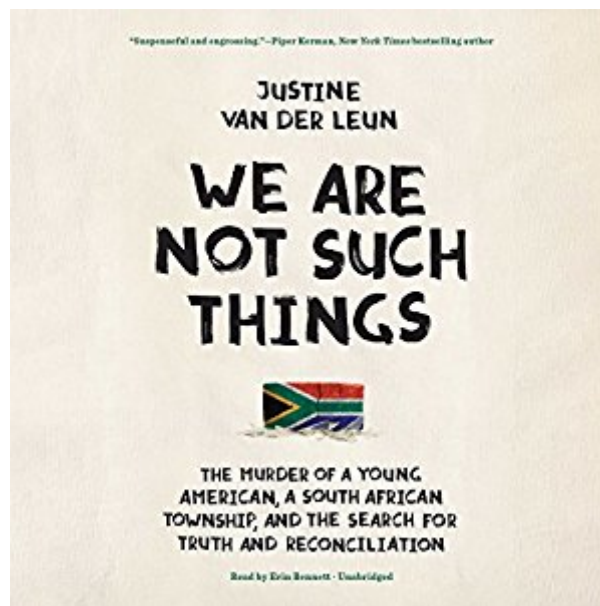


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# We Are Not Such Things: The Murder Of A Young American, A South African Township, And The Search For Truth And Reconciliation



## Synopsis

Justine van der Leun reopens the murder of a young American woman in South Africa, an iconic case that calls into question our understanding of truth and reconciliation, loyalty, justice, race, and class. The story of Amy Biehl is well known in South Africa. The 26-year-old white American Fulbright scholar was brutally murdered on August 25, 1993, during the final, fiery days of apartheid by a mob of young black men in a township outside Cape Town. Her parents' forgiveness of two of her killers became a symbol of the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. Justine van der Leun decided to introduce the story to an American audience. But as she delved into the case, the prevailing narrative started to unravel. Why didn't the eyewitness reports agree on who killed Amy Biehl? Were the men convicted of the murder actually responsible for her death? And then Van der Leun discovered another brutal crime committed on the same day, in the very same area. The true story of Amy Biehl's death, it turned out, was not only a story of forgiveness, but also a reflection of the complicated history of a troubled country. *We Are Not Such Things* is the result of Van der Leun's four-year investigation into this strange, knotted tale of injustice, violence, and compassion. The bizarre twists and turns of this case and its aftermath - and the story that emerges of what happened on that fateful day in 1993 and in the decades that followed - come together in an unsparing account of life in South Africa today. Van der Leun immerses herself in the lives of her subjects and paints a stark, moving portrait of a township and its residents. We come to understand that the issues at the heart of her investigation are universal in scope and powerful in resonance. *We Are Not Such Things* reveals how reconciliation is impossible without an acknowledgment of the past, a lesson as relevant to America today as to a South Africa still struggling with the long shadow of its history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I'm a white, former South African (liberal, anti-apartheid activist, left in 1975) who knows the country and Cape Town, and worked in the townships and District Six as a medical student and an intern at the University of Cape Town's teaching hospitals. Therefore I was naturally drawn to read this book. The author, an American visiting South Africa with her SA-born husband, manages to get under the skin of South Africa, below the apparent truths, specifically of a particular event at a particular time in the country's history - the senseless, non-political, brutal murder by a mob, of Amy Biehl, an idealistic 26-year-old American woman who was working for a better South Africa for people of color and especially women, during the transition to black rule under Nelson Mandela. In August 1993, the month of Amy's murder, the country was on fire. Some of the descriptions of violence, including the actual murder of Ms Biehl are profoundly disturbing on many levels. The author captures the mood of the times and of the mobs. In addition, through her descriptions of the real-life characters in the book, she paints an accurately wrenching picture of the often grinding misery, degradation, struggles, and everyday violence and death that was and is life in the "non-white" townships among the many consequences and legacies of apartheid. Into the story the author weaves South African history for context, and discusses the Truth & Reconciliation Commission its purposes and complex outcomes for different individuals. To read this book as a former South African is to be catapulted back into the turmoil and hate and incomprehensible brutality and injustices of apartheid, that led so many of us to leave; but also into present-day South Africa, 22 years after Mandela's ANC came to power.

"We Are Not Such Things", by American author, Justine Van Der Leun, is a cautionary, yet uplifting, tale told on many levels. On one level, it is the retelling of the story of the brutal death of a young American woman in 1993. On another level, it is the story of the quest for the truth by this a young, naive author and scholar. Most importantly, it the complex story of South Africa with all of its scars, half truths, and different perceptions of reality. I was attracted to this book, having spent time there in 1996. I wanted to see if my impressions aligned in any way with the South Africa presented in the book. Instead, I was presented with many different stories. Some of the tales were self-serving; some idealized, possibly for political effect. Each one contributes to this compelling tale. We have the parents of Amy Biehl, particularly her mother, Linda, who establish a foundation in Amy's

memory in South Africa and who forgave, befriended and employed her daughter's killers. We have Easy and Ntobeko, each of whom spent about four years in prison for Amy's murder. We have Amy's roommate, Melanie, who used Amy's clothes and credit card after her death. Once called "animals" by Nelson Mandela, they were pardoned by the The Committee for Truth and Reconciliation. This is not the kind of book you pick up to read with a lemonade. It is better off read in small segments, slowly and carefully, as each image forages its way to your brain. You may not find people you can fully relate to in the tale, but you may find yourself less judgmental than you were. I have marked some sections to read again.

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