

An ordinary life of striving and compassion

Pushing Boulders ★★★★★
Athol Williams (Staging Post, R245)

LIFE is about the dream that lay on the other side of the boulders," says Athol Williams, in his inspirational memoir *Pushing Boulders*. On its surface, it is a heart-warming tale of a Cape Flats boy making good. But it asks hard questions about the impact of privilege in education, the workplace and everyday life.

"I felt that we need records of the lives of ordinary South Africans who lived through apartheid," Williams says of his motives in writing the book.

"While the stories of the Mandelas, Tambos, Sisulus, et cetera have been told, we are largely blind to what life was like for ordinary people struggling through the burdens of apartheid and who still suffer under the enduring effects of it."



POET: Athol Williams helps the poor

His path required great courage, tenacity and luck.

"Many of us forgo our dreams and thus live lives of mediocrity at best," he says.

"I think this is because we have romantic ideas of fulfilling dreams rather than the appreciation that fulfilling dreams can require effort, struggle [and] sacrifice.

"To be alive is to walk a path

to take a journey; it matters less where the path leads than that we have the courage to walk."

Despite his tremendous efforts, Williams almost didn't make it. His tale demonstrates why commitment to hard work and study is not enough when born into inequality. His achievements required others to boost him over the boulders of poverty, classism and racism.

He says: "A lot [of talented minds are] lost when we systematically oppress a group of people — we rob the oppressed group of realising their full potential which in turn robs society of this group's contribution. At a spiritual level I think we also rob everyone of realising our unity as humanity."

Much of Williams's life has been focused on his own dreams. After the death of his father, however, he rethought his definition of success. He searched for ways to help those still living in the disadvantaged areas of South Africa.

He describes this time as, "A devastating experience, one that made me question so much for the first time — where should I live, what should I do... It was the start of me really looking away from myself and considering my place in the lives of others."

Williams, an award-winning poet, is familiar with putting himself out there through his words. "I do reveal a tremendous amount in the memoir and have tried to reveal as much of who I am, my fears and desires, but the nature of poetry is such that reveals your soul, which I think memoir can hint at but not fully reveal."

The book isn't perfect; among other things, the prose could have been tightened. Despite this, *Pushing Boulders* should be widely read.

"I always hope that my writing serves as a catalyst for constructive conversations," Williams says, and this book achieves precisely that. — *Tiah Beutement @ms_tiahmarie*