

Pushing Boulders by Athol Williams – an Autobiography

Reviewed by Cecily Camara

Pushing Boulders by Athol Williams is an autobiography which many people in the Western Cape especially – and the rest of South Africa in general, can readily identify with. The language used is accessible, makes for an enjoyable read which delights and educates about political events and people, without being didactic.

Athol Williams was born in 1970 and at an early age experienced the trauma of being uprooted and having to relocate from Lansdowne to Mitchells' Plain (MP) in the seventies, when MP was but a heap of sand. From an early age he rebelled at being confined, defined - “choked and constrained” as he puts it. A clear indication of the way his later years were to develop. As with many of us who sought “to rise above” our circumstances, Athol was determined to do so and did – but in a most outstanding and unique way. Through dreaming, coupled with hard work, fortitude, a “bullish” attitude to anything which stood in his way, he became the first person world-wide to hold five first class degrees from five universities, then ranked among the top five in the world. An outstanding achievement and unheard of at the time. His first degree being one in Engineering from Wits. In between studies he rose in the financial/management world to become a highly sought after business consultant, ultimately opening his own firm in Johannesburg after returning home.

In between studies, traveling and business, making friends through-out the world, he briefly mentions love affairs over the years. He finally married a young woman who had worked in his firm and settled down to married life. Throughout the book, Athol shows what a staunch family man he is through his relationships with his father and brother. I would have liked to hear a bit more about his mother. After living the high life, travelling to every country in the world repeatedly, he finally realised his life's calling. His dream was to equip himself “to work towards the socio-economic freedom of others.” Towards that end, through growing dis-illusionment with making money, he set in motion steps to return home and in the process rid himself of all material possessions which included properties, a fleet of high-end cars and a huge mansion where he had a library room with a thousand and more books. This is another “Monk who sold his ferrari” and thankfully a South African one.

He co-founded the NGO 'Read to Rise' which strives to encourage reading in underprivileged schools around the Western Cape, where they provide mini-libraries in schools which do not have a book let alone a library. Athol maintained that books would set him free, so now he in turn motivates, supports others deprived of educational resources to achieve, to rise up and follow their dreams!

Athol strikes me as a person who will be phenomenal at anything he undertakes because he does not expect success to fall into his lap and is prepared to suffer and endure hardship and misery for his dreams to succeed. He now concentrates on his motivational work and writing poetry. A prolific writer, he has poetry books published for which he has received awards and other accolades. He will continue to astound us by his creativity and abilities to “seize the moment.” He refused in the past, and I expect always will, not to allow boulders to crush him. He will not only push them, but kick them – especially the difficult ones - out of his way with glee, with enthusiasm and having succeeded in kicking them into tiny shards, he moves to afford the underprivileged pupil to dream big, to develop self-belief that one day they too can make up-lifting, worthwhile choices.