



THE UNSPEAKABLE

Powerful and provocative, brilliantly written, "The Unspeakable" is as unforgettable as it is unsettling.

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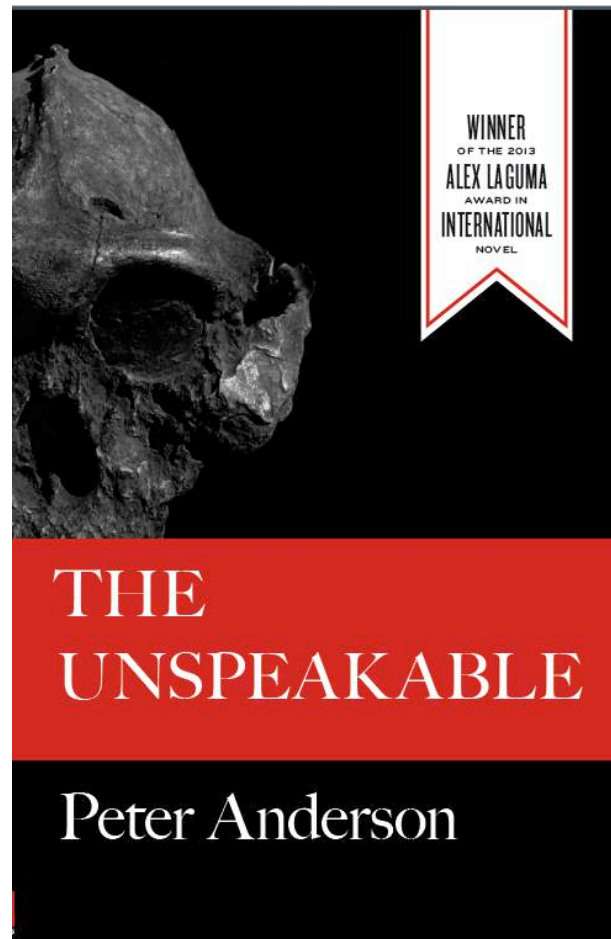
It is the mid-1980s, the era of so-called reformist apartheid, and South Africa is in flames. Police and military are gunning down children at the forefront of the struggle.

Far from such action, it seems, a small party of four is traveling by minibus to the north of the country, close to the border with Zimbabwe.

Their aim is to shoot a documentary on the discovery of a prehistoric skull that Professor Digby Bamford boasts is evidence that "True man first arose in southern Africa".

Boozy, self-absorbed Professor Bamford is unaware that his young lover, Vicky, brings with her some complications. Rian, the videographer, was once in love with her, and his passion has been re-ignited. Bucs, a young man from the townships, is doing his best not to be involved in the increasingly deadly tensions.

Told in the first person by Rian, it centres on the conflicted being of the white male under apartheid. Unlike many of the great novels of the era, it renounces any claim to the relative safety zone of moralist dissociation from the racist crime against humanity, and cuts instead to the quick of complicity.





It is sometimes said of Albert Camus's "The Stranger" (in Britain, "The Outsider") that everything would have turned out very differently, had the murder only taken place "a few hundred miles to the south". **This** is that South with a vengeance.

Peter Anderson hails from South Africa, but currently resides in North Texas where he is an associate professor of English at Austin College. The author of a previous collection of poems, *Vanishing Ground*, his work in fiction and poetry has appeared in numerous literary magazines and has been anthologized in both America and South Africa. *The Unspeakable* is his first novel.



The Unspeakable is being published on September 21st 2014 by [CR Press](#)

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Reviews

Roger Brunyate – Top 500 Reviewer and Vine Voice, Amazon **5 Stars**

First, let's get the disclaimer out of the way. I was asked to review this by the publisher, and read a PDF of the typed manuscript. Generally in these circumstances, the most one expects to find is raw promise that one can review honestly but with some indulgence. Not so here. This is a finished work by an assured author that leaps immediately off the page. Raw, certainly, but with a deliberate rawness intended to disorientate and provoke. Reviewing it is not a matter for indulgence; writing like this asks no favors of the reader. My only problem is to pick up the pieces after it has walloped into me.

South Africa in the 1980s, the last decade of Apartheid. A group of four travel by minivan to a remote area near the northeast border to film an educational documentary. There is Professor Digby Bamford, an overweight has-been who achieved brief celebrity by discovering a human skull at this spot that promised to throw theories of human evolution on their heads. There is Vicky Daintree, his much younger girlfriend. The only black in the party is Nando, known as Bucs, an ambitious young man from the townships who is working as sound technician. And -- as director, cameraman, driver, and dogsbody -- there is the narrator of the novel, Adrian Erasmus, always called Rian. Rian is angry, very angry. Coming as he does from a poor white Boer family, he resents the professor's assumption of superiority and his sexual taunting. For Vicky, it soon appears, was Rian's girlfriend when they were both in their teens. Now Rian is probably closest to Bucs; the two call each other Bra, or brother.

Interspersed with this episode, sometimes in whole chapters at a time, sometimes in fleeting paragraphs, are scenes from Rian's childhood, growing up with a loving but feckless father who runs a backyard repair shop when he is not drinking. Heavily in debt to a local landowner, he is clearly low on the totem pole. But there are others lower still: his native servants whom he abuses without thought, taking the woman and chaining the elderly man to the same tree to which he has already tied a captive baboon. Readers familiar with South African fiction, such as [PHILIDA](#) by André Brink, may find little to surprise them, unless that the nineteenth-century attitudes linger so long, and so unapologetically, into the twentieth. A much bigger surprise for me was that the central scenes of the novel, the film-shoot at the Place of the Skull, do not on the surface have any obvious racial content at all. Anderson's subject is really a kind of national traumatic stress: the situation of three individuals in the white minority, only too conscious that Apartheid is on its last legs. Whether they try to rise above it, or go with the flow, they are each trapped in their own thought-patterns and background. It is only at the end -- in the only scene that becomes in any way didactic -- that the racial issues are addressed head on. But once they are, their impact is devastating.

As I was reading, various comparisons flitted through my mind. To the earlier work of JM Coetzee, for instance, such as [DISGRACE](#) -- but that is an obvious reference and not very meaningful. To other more recent South African writers such as Damon Galgut in [THE GOOD DOCTOR](#), for the sense of how much goes on beneath the surface in South Africa, and does so still. And oddly enough, to Australia: the trip to a remote spot that goes horribly wrong had me thinking of movies of the seventies such as [WALKABOUT](#) and [PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK](#). At times, the constant bubbling up of sex and violence made me think of Cormac McCarthy. But the moment I got into an American context, I saw that the most meaningful comparison of all was to the great William Faulkner: for his intertwining of time-lines, for his sense that huge things can hang on trivial moments, and above all for his understanding of how the Original Sin of a society can roil away beneath the surface, to emerge in surprising and terrible ways.



Dr. Carol Daeley, Professor of English, Austin College *5 stars*

Peter Anderson is a colleague and friend. Otherwise I might never have known about his gripping, transcendent novel of South Africa, "The Unspeakable." Don't let the experience of reading it get away from you. Anderson manages to meld richly individual realistic detail about settings and characters with a profound grasp of the mythic in a story that is layered in time yet moves toward its necessary conclusion with the force of a powerful river. Reading the novel, I was constantly reminded of Faulkner's claim that "The past is never dead. It isn't even past." Anderson is a quite different kind of writer than Faulkner but they are connected in their ability to embody the shadows cast on their respective countries by their racial histories.

Like Faulkner, Anderson makes the specific history of his own country part of the universal human experience of guilt, betrayal, and incomprehension. There are better and worse ways of dealing politically with a country riven by the histories of Dutch, English, Xhosa, Zulu, Indian, Jew, men, women, rich, poor, but there are no easy ways of dealing with it: what Anderson gives us is not this kind of abstract analysis but the truth underlying it, as it functions for particular characters in particular settings, each of them impinging on the others in particular ways. Mythic patterns of blood sacrifice are embodied in events that are firmly grounded in the lives and identities of the characters.

Two characters approach nobility: a white woman and a black man. But all the characters are vivid, even the ones we see only briefly. The novel moves with exceptional grace between the darkness within individuals and the social implications of that darkness. Samuel Johnson, who knew a thing or two about this dynamic, declined to believe that human beings, deeply flawed as we are, would ever manage to create and sustain the ideal societies we can imagine and yearn for. We cannot walk away from the past into a clean future. "The Unspeakable" demands that we recognize that some things cannot be atoned for, cannot be erased. It is almost unbearably honest. Besides that, it's a damned fine story.

Dr. Patrick Duffey – Professor, Austin College *5 stars*

Peter Anderson's *The Unspeakable* (2014) is an extraordinary achievement. It is a brutally honest slice of Boer or Afrikaner South Africa--the haves and the have-nots--during the less examined period before the end of apartheid. But the ambition and the success of this novel go well beyond the gripping literary account of a painful chapter of world history.

Anderson's novel is nothing less than one of the most probing explorations of what Conrad called the heart of darkness, the origins of evil, the horrors that everyday, supposedly "normal" people are capable of. The novel is as brave and unflinching as it is authentic, tightly constructed, and hauntingly imagined.

What leads people to commit unspeakable acts? Who is to blame? Are answers to be found in the past? Is anything really "unspeakable"? What does it mean to attempt to speak or write about the "unspeakable"? What are the dangers and risks of expressing such things? Anderson's novel is a profound, insightful meditation on these and many other questions, but it is also a compelling, suspenseful story that meticulously builds to an ingenious, devastating denouement.

Philippa Rees Author *4 stars*

To review this book requires a balancing act. Not merely to midwife its delivery to the waiting reader, with due attention to all fingers and toes, but to give some indications of its demands, and to be honest about how those played out subjectively. To get this balance right is far from easy because one thing can be said; it will stimulate heated debate.

The brew released by this corkscrew of a book is potent. It presupposes a discerning palate, a robust stomach, but more critically a mind freed of easy judgement, but rich in associations, one that relishes complexity, rejoices in myth and is sensitive to symbolism. The terroir from which this wine is pressed is unyielding, flint-stony, windswept,



baked. The small and unpromising Catorba grape has a black skin so strong and sour it serves only to pop the green savour on the tongue, in sharp bursts of bitter sweetness. Fermented through memory the aroma is, at first, astringent, with hints of pepper trees, metallic scrap yards, chicken manure, chained animals and African sweat. Later the richer scents of longing and sharp reminiscence makes its poignancy harsh and builds up so many interpenetrating layers that it must be both sipped and gulped (sometimes holding one's nose) in turns.

Enough of extended metaphor. I must come clean and admit that I know this country as the author does. As a child I experienced the unrelieved tedium of the Platteland, with its rusty mill blades creaking, the fast scudding clouds that seldom deliver, the repressed Dominee that opens farm gates in his Sunday black like a carrion crow. All these senses drive its people to a kind of madness. So beautiful, so poignant and so thirsty. Unlike the settled Boer, with his belief in heroic privation, the poor-white Afrikaner belonged nowhere, his hatred and alienation turned inwards and found necessary victims in powerless farm 'kaffirs', defenceless maids; his self loathing festered like the rinkhals at the root of the ant spire, that muscular serpent lurking to rear when suddenly exposed.

It is this atmospheric, historical richness that has, I suspect, urged the author to lay it bare. The newly sanitised South Africa, basking in post-Mandela sharp shadows and blinding light has obscured that complex, tortured, crude, assertive striving, its casual cruelty, its repressed Calvinist certainty of Divine Right. Against this is the nobility of the rural African, invisible to his oppressors, powerless against a demolition gang, but in a crucial scene in the book generous and forgiving, because held in a tradition of tribal respect.

There are so many strands of allusion, the plot is as tightly woven as a Zulu basket, the characters are so sharply defined that they strike sparks from interaction. Every moment spills into dangerous possibilities. Small moments of kindness, like the baking of bread, or the dream of a striped umbrella by the sea stand out like beacons. Humanity is hard to find, except in a few memories of the narrator's tragic childhood. The photographer, Adrian Erasmus (Rian) takes you with a very firm grip into darkness. His narcissism and obsessive fantasies of sexual abuse are trying, trying to read and deliberately building towards explosive consequences. Being in his close company is like living with an uncertainly buried land mine, any step could blow it all to smithereens.

The events of the book will shock, they are meant to. By the end of the work these casual and degenerate impulses find a kind of logical inevitability. Underneath the events are more interesting suggestions, but like the ant spire they need careful exposure for their structure is intricate. The character of Bamford, a repellent, shunned and lonely palaeontologist with an interesting hypothesis- that modern Man has degenerated from earlier and more intelligent beings is borne out not only in his own crudity, but the world about us all. If Africa remains the cradle of Man, and Bamford's black discovered skull all that remains of Man's earlier and more civilised incarnation then the accelerating bestiality of recent South African history has an inherent logic. There is an evangelism that underscores what at first will repel. I can only urge a reader who begins it to persist to the end to find 'The Soul of the White Ant' and understand Eugene Marais, and many like him, who loved enough to find solace in the society of termites and then to blow his brains out.

This book introduces a non-South African (and the new minted South African) to the conflicted torture of being part of that history, its guilt, its affection, and its inescapable summons, like the gentle Kudu spiralling horns against the sky, and then gone.

There is ambivalence at every turn, and through every viewfinder. No single interpreter is sufficient.

It is an extraordinary book, a brew steeped in reflection, spiked with anger, never easy, but a personal and honest corrective to simplistic ideas about a heart rending country that calls to anyone who belongs there. We all still do, and can never escape. This book is a lens to light a wider understanding. The ending leaves the reader reeling, but perhaps newly sober about almost all history, and the rinkhals waiting to rear in each of us. It needs courage to read it, and to match the author's courage in setting it down.



Eileen Shaw – Reader and Reviewer *5 stars*

I did not know how to review this book – all sense escaped me as I came to the end and I wondered if I should even attempt a review, so bereft of the usual solipsistic self-importance, the casual intent reviewing induces in me. This book is a devastating artefact in which the Boer world is meticulously picked apart, but left as implacably locked as the padlock attaching the wild baboon to his prison of chain in the opening chapter.

This book is a raw story, a deliberate outrage, a mixture of sexual dalliance, pain, violence and tragedy that touches the soul of white South Africa to its eternal shame. It has taken my breath away. It is a towering achievement.

It's the story of one day in which Archaeologist Digby Bamford travels with the narrator, a camera man, Adrian (Rian) Erasmus, and Vicky Daintree, who has previously had an affair with Rian, who would like to rekindle her emotional attachment. Along with them travels Bucs, a black servant. They travel with the intent of making a film that will reassert Digby's past discovery of a skull that he claims is the pre-historical artefact that proves man's primacy in time. The book also travels into their past as well, as Rian recalls his childhood with his brutal but loving father. Rian's father is deeply in debt to a richer family and his hope is that the daughter of his debtor, Crystal le Roux will agree to marry him. It's a vain hope from the start. This is the hope that exposes Rian's father's naivety, that such a simplistic solution to his problems may be possible.

Two journeys, then. One into the past and one into the future, both to be met with violence and death, and an excoriating indictment of white South Africa in the person of Org, the sergeant with his hate-filled rant: "A kaffir is a terrible thing. He is a thing without a brain. Chop off his head, cut it open and what will you find? Nothing. A handful of worms, maybe. Snot and bone and one big empty hole..." Trapped by this last encounter in an agonising paradox Rian is led to the ultimate betrayal. As always, it seems, even at a time of coming change, racism is endemic.

I would urge you to read this book. For many years Peter Anderson felt that as a 'white' South African he had no right to write, his only output a small collection of poetry: *Vanishing Ground*, a few short stories and some creative nonfiction. He says *The Unspeakable* is a breakthrough for him. It is work which runs against the grain of the approved narrative in and of South Africa, since it does not pretend (as he fears in the country at present) that the dark past can simply be glossed over or forgotten. Don't let this extraordinary and hauntingly moving novel be forgotten.

Bryon Butler – Author & Teacher *4 stars*

"It's a story, not a lie. I mean, I think, a way of speaking the unspeakable."

Rian, Bamford, Vicky and others deal with love, lust, origins, meaning, racism, the past, injustice and more in Peter Anderson's *The Unspeakable*. This powerful, graphic novel, set in the 1980s in an Apartheid dominated South Africa, explores these timeless themes compellingly as they play out in the country of Anderson's youth.

Bamford takes us to Africa where years earlier he'd discovered a prehistoric skull that might explain humanity's evolution. At the same time, his alcoholic lapses and crude behavior show a de-evolution of humanity. Rian attempts to film the trip, and survive it, yet shows that his origins continue to chain him and spiral him downward. Vicky has loved them both a different times, or maybe has used them both. What is underneath her sensuality? Could she turn the tables to her own advantage? What might evolve?

The reader finds himself pulled into these lives: at times tender, at times distraught, through the convincing dialogue and character development that Anderson provides as the story unfolds. And never forgotten, always as close as the kombi they drive in, is the racial discrimination and domination of Apartheid. From the opening and



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closing chapters to references throughout, its cultural hierarchy by skin color is juxtaposed by the individual actions of its protagonists; actions influenced and formed by this national sickness.

With the deaths of Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer and Chinua Achebe, literature has needed a recent African voice, better said a voice from Africa, to chronicle modern existence and malaise through the cultural lens of a sub-continental worldview. Peter Anderson does this well, leaving the reader with characters who remain, and their decisions unsettling, after the book is finished.