

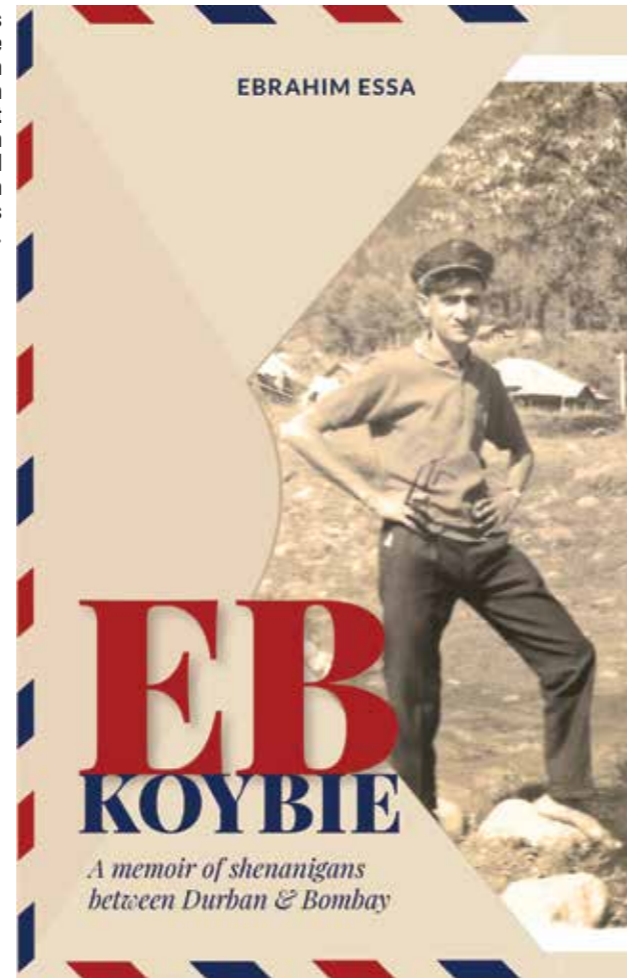


WORDS: LAURA JONES

FROM DURBAN TO BOMBAY

EBRAHIM ESSA'S SATIRICAL MEMOIR TACKLES QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF A FIRST-GENERATION SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN LIVING IN DURBAN AT THE BEGINNING OF APARTHEID, AND IN BOMBAY, SHORTLY AFTER INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE.

The book has entered the Top 30 on the Amazon Kindle Best Seller List in the Historical African Biographies section.



My brother, Ahmed (middle), with Pravin Gordhan and his sister, around 1957.

Ekoymie: A memoir of shenanigans between Durban and Bombay by Ebrahim Essa chronicles a quirky childhood growing up in the 1950s in an Indian township on the outskirts of Durban. Here, he bunks school to watch Hindi films, irons his brother's clothes in exchange for reading his collection of banned imported comic books,

and tries to outrun gangsters in the Grey Street Casbah. Just as he begins to win at life, apartheid education prompts his father to send him to India to study. He spends 21 days on board the SS Karanja

nervously snacking on Lemon Creams before reaching Bombay. But studying in India is not all that it's made out to be. It's far worse. He battles jaundice, long-drop toilets and electricity cuts during the 1965 India-Pakistan war. In this memoir, Ebrahim uses his rich narrative to document a fascinating period in the South African Indian community.

Why did you write this book?

I was a school teacher on the verge of retirement when I decided to write my memoirs. I had no idea what I was trying to do by writing this book. I guess I wanted to tell the story of what it was like to grow up during the 1950s and 1960s. I didn't want it to be boring, but personal and so I decided that it would be a memoir that remembers the past by poking fun at everyone I encountered growing up.

I thought my immediate family would read it, perhaps some broad-minded cousins, and a few friends. I didn't know it was going to turn out like this and enter bookstores and be sold on the internet.

What is the book about?

The tales are mostly based on true incidents from my life growing up. Trying to recall events from the past was difficult at first, but I would get into this routine of sitting down, closing my eyes and picturing our first home in Mayville. Soon the memories came like a flood.

It begins in Mayville, a poor, rural township outside Durban. We are then forced to move to the busy, horn-blasting



My brother, Walla, used to make me iron his clothes before allowing me to read his imported comics.

urban area of Grey Street because of the Group Areas Act. In the 1960s, I travelled by ship to Bombay to study, because my father felt that apartheid education wouldn't take me far.

What's your interesting writing quirk?

In all humility, I know I have a style of my own. I use simple words and I try to avoid clichés. The writing is a little funny, different, and even bizarre at times, often ending with some type of twist. The book took almost two years to write. It was actually much longer than the published



My father spent a lot of time travelling between South Africa and India (1957)



My sister Hawa (1961).

version. I wrote all of it on paper and it was typed up by friends at the school I was teaching at.

How did the book get published?

I gave it to my son, Azad, a journalist based in America. He took around five years to edit and make sense of my nonsense and get it published. It was such a long process, that I thought it would never actually happen.

Who will the book appeal to?

So far, the response to the book has been immense and seems to be of interest to all age groups and for different reasons. Some of the older people, like people from my generation, say it transports them to the 1950s and 1960s. Younger readers say the stories make them curious about the past. With India so much in the news too, there are many people curious about the country and how it might have been all those years ago. Then there are some academics in America and Singapore who have already said that they want to teach it in their classes. Honestly, I don't know what that is all about!

Name three of your favourite and most inspiring books and why?

As a child, I loved Enid Blyton's books, as well as Treasure Island and Robinson Crusoe. As a kid of the 1950s and 1960s, I also devoured comic books. Later, I was immensely influenced by Shakespeare. And, of course, I was and remain obsessed with Hindi cinema of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.



"I HAD FIVE PATERNAL UNCLES, FOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ONE IN INDIA. FOR SOME REASON, EACH UNCLE HAD A SON NAMED EBRAHIM. WHAT A STUPID IDEA. IT MADE ME FEEL LIKE A SAUSAGE FROM A BOEREWORS FACTORY."

IMAGES COURTESY: WWW.SOCIALBANDITMEDIA.CO.ZA