



# From the history of humanity to portraits of power

Four books to enthrall and enlighten this Christmas – and their prices aren't bad

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**C**HRISTMAS is coming and the bookshops are full of beautiful books vying for attention as possible gifts. In this review I'd like to speak about four strong contenders.

My first Christmas selection is *The History of the World*, a giant volume by Frank Welsh, published by Quercus.

The book is a joy to handle. The beautiful cover invites one to step inside, where magnificent pictures beautifully reproduced on high-quality paper stimulate interest, so that one naturally turns to the text page to find out more.

The range is breathtaking, as the author sets out to guide his readers "from the dawn of humanity to the modern age".

Well, that takes some doing and, almost inevitably, error creeps in, as when the siege of Rorke's Drift is placed before Isandhlwana, instead of after. I'm not aware of any other lapses but in a record covering so many centuries and dealing even-handedly with the West and the East, it would not be surprising if some did occur.

The *History of the World* is astonishingly cheap at R294.95, and any recipient of it as a gift would have much cause to be grateful.

Visually, the most stunning of my selection is *Evocative Africa: Ventures of Discovery*, with photographs by Gerald Cubitt and text by Benni Hotz. This large-format volume, published by Clifton Publications in Cape Town, lives up to the promise of its title, as the beautiful pictures of an acclaimed photographer really do evoke the splendour and mystery of sub-Saharan Africa; one feels like a discoverer, seeing the new with wonder and the familiar as if for the first time.

The book is nearly perfect in its



*Jewish Memories of Mandela* will be an excellent addition to any Mandela collection. This image of Mandela in the garden is from a photographic essay in this beautifully presented book.

kind, and yet a note of caution is necessary. The market for coffee-table books is highly competitive and while the occasional error of spelling or punctuation can be overlooked, lapses of a more serious nature cannot.

It is unacceptable that a book published in post-apartheid South Africa can still give credence to the discredited and reactionary notion that Great Zimbabwe may have been built "by Indians who sailed here in catamarans using favourable monsoon trade winds".

This said, *Evocative Africa* is still highly recommended as a magnificent photographic collection, excellently presented.

Given the quality of the book, it

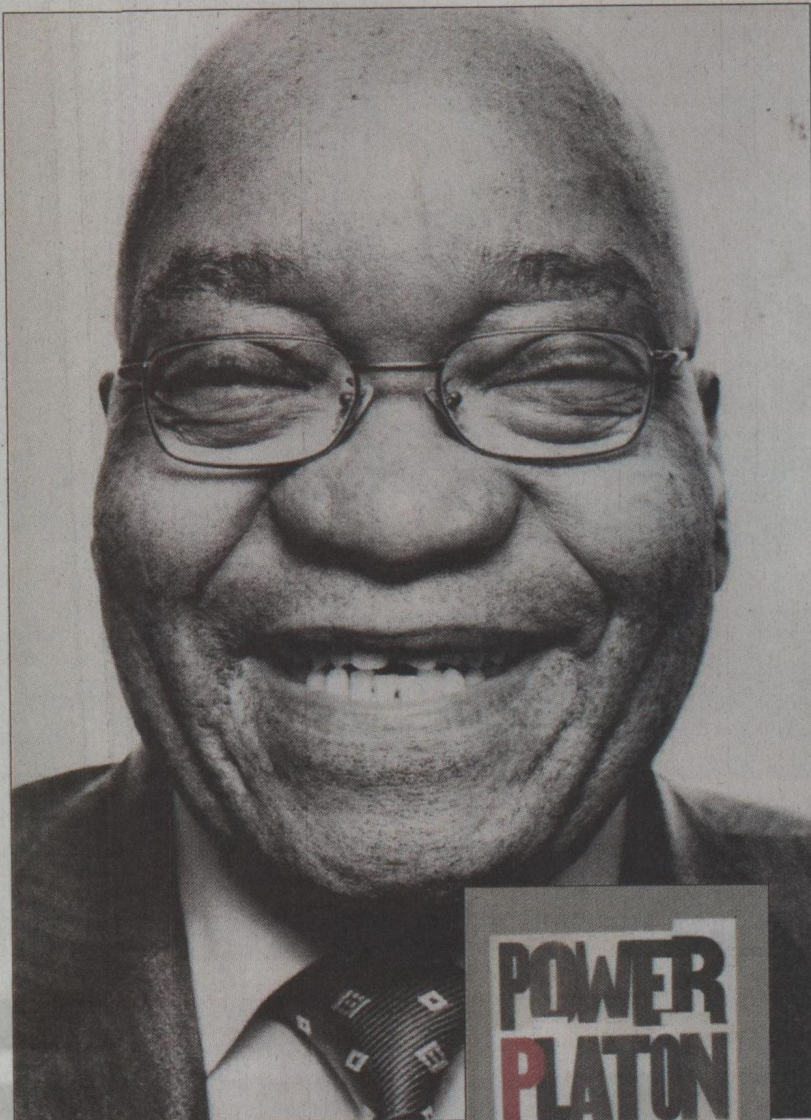
is value for money at R499.

Third in line is a very different book.

*Power* is a collection of photographs of world leaders by renowned photographer Platon.

Handsomely published by Wild Dog Press, the book comprises 200 pages of powerful, full-page portraits, followed by a section that outlines the political biographies of the leaders featured.

The pictures are powerful because Platon so successfully makes the cliché of the camera not lying come true. Technical skill would not be enough to get the camera to see through the image these much-photographed men and women would like to project. It is the



Platon's powerful images of world leaders include this striking one of President Jacob Zuma.

artist's interaction with his subjects that has them relaxing their guard sufficiently for the truth to emerge.

A long quotation from David Remnick's introduction says it all: "Platon's Qaddafi is surreal, grotesque, as if he's been transported from a barstool in *Star Wars*; Mugabe ... casts his thuggish scowl at the camera ... The portrait of the Russian leader Vladimir Putin reveals him for all his steely arrogance; this is the face of the prototypical officer of the Soviet secret services. Like a silent-movie actor, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy delivers his lascivious leer on cue."

South Africans will turn to Platon's portrayal of President Jacob Zuma with great interest and, as

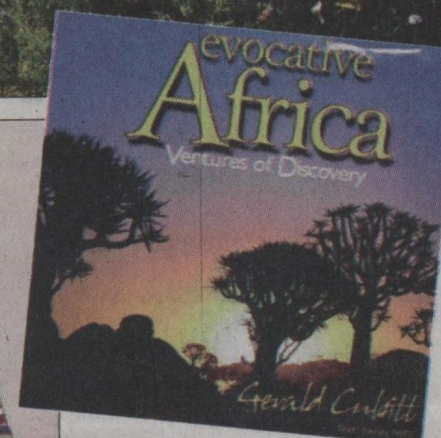
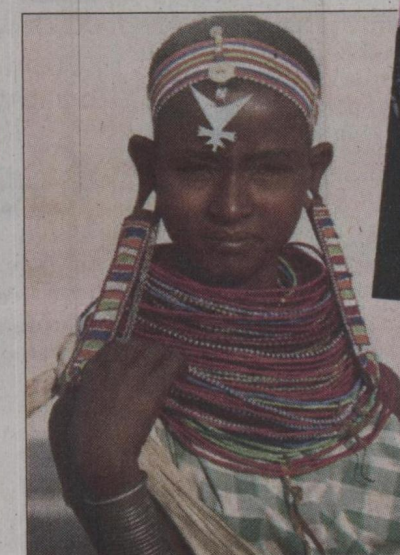
they study his features and those of all the other leaders, they will come to appreciate the sheer genius of the photographer.

*Power* will cost you R240 and it is guaranteed to go down well.

My final choice for today is another impressive coffee-table book, *Jewish Memories of Mandela*, published by the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, with text by David Saks.

The title of the book is self-explanatory.

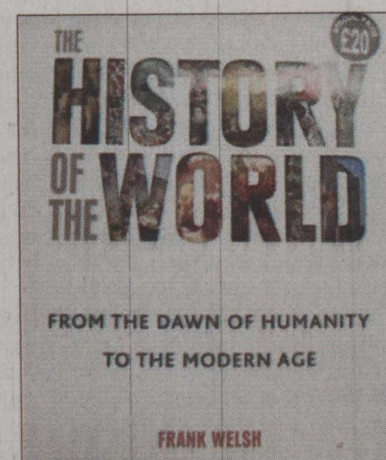
It seeks to chronicle the close association of SA Jews with Nelson Mandela throughout his political career. Despite the candidly acknowledged fact that before 1990 the mainstream leadership of SA Jewry opted for non-involvement in



*Evocative Africa: Ventures of Discovery* is just that, with its splendid photos taken at beauty spots across the continent.

political affairs, Jewish people played a key role in Mandela's early life as a lawyer in Joburg and a disproportionately large role in the Struggle.

*Jewish Memories of Mandela* is a handsome, richly illustrated tribute to a great man and some of the many men and women who were privileged to share part of his life journey. In its pages we encounter familiar names: Sydney Kentridge, Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Helen Suzman, Nadine Gordimer, Raymond Ackerman, Gill Marcus and more. The price – R450 – is not a lot for this excellent book with its added advantage of being an attractive collector's piece for those interested in Judaica or Mandeliana.



*The History of the World* is a joy to page through and a bargain at R294.95.