



UNITA soldiers stand on the remains of a tank, January 23, 1990 near Jamba, Angola. Picture: Getty Images

STILL FIGHTING

Everyone agrees that the battle of Cuito Cuanavale changed history. But who won it remains fiercely contested. By Archie Henderson

It's been 30 years since Cuito Cuanavale became a landmark in the Angolan civil war. South African and Angolan troops, some of them just boys, died there. So did many Cubans. The full casualty toll in a war that was fought mainly in secret is still unknown.

Along with the mysteries are the myths, one of them being that a decisive battle was fought around the little town between 1987 and 1988. There certainly was some fighting, but the big battle was fought 170km to the southeast on the Lomba River and it ended decisively in favour of South Africa and its ally Unita.

An entire brigade of the Angolan army was wiped out at the Lomba, forcing a retreat by the Angolans and Cubans back across the confluence of the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers. There, in 1988, the fighting ended in either a stalemate, if you accept the military facts, or in a victory for the MPLA and Cubans, if you believe Fidel Castro's propaganda.

Veteran journalist Fred Bridgland, author of *Cuito Cuanavale*, says: "If anyone won, I'm afraid it was the South Africans because [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev gave Fapla a final £1-billion. 'Go and take out Jonas Savimbi and his headquarters in Jamba. But if



Cuito Cuanavale ★★★★★
Fred Bridgland
Jonathan Ball Publishers, R290



A Far-Away War ★★
Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin (Editors), Sun Press, R350

this doesn't work, that's it. No more money."

Since Angolan independence in 1975, the country's recognised government, the MPLA, had been fighting a civil war against Savimbi's Unita. The two liberation movements had fought the Portuguese. Both needed outside support: the MPLA got it from Cuba, East Germany and the Soviet Union; Unita from South Africa and the US.

Bridgland's book remains one of the best accounts of the war. As a Reuters correspondent assigned to Lusaka, he arrived

as a young idealist filled with notions of "liberating the whole of southern Africa by the power of my pen".

He made an auspicious start. Being in the right place at the right time, he got a scoop on South Africa's invasion of Angola in 1975. "I began to realise that the war was a lot more complex than the musings of an undergraduate," he says. "This was a grown-up story. Very complicated things were happening."

Bridgland became enamoured of Savimbi, made many friends among the Unita commanders and covered the war mostly from their side. It put him in touch with the South Africans, whose military commander, Jannie Geldenhuys, allowed him to interview his troops. Those interviews make for a compelling story.

Bridgland has two big regrets: Savimbi turned out to be not a charismatic guerrilla leader, but a madman who murdered his own people; and the other side of the story – that of the Angolans and Cubans – was closed to him. Apart from a limited budget that prevented him from reaching the Havana archives, the Cuban bureaucracy was "horrendous".

This should have made *Far-Away War*, which had the benefit of Cuban and Russian editors, a welcome addition to the war's literature. Sadly, it's disappointing. There is too much academic pontificating and no personal stories from commanders in the field, or soldiers in a trench or tank. Its value is the photographs from Cuban archives and the extensive bibliography. 📖

BOOK WORM

The Life of Worm and Other Misconceptions ★★★★★
Ken Barris, Kwela, R250

The worlds depicted in *The Life of Worm and Other Misconceptions* are ordinary, mundane, bizarre and surreal, but always rooted in the beauty of language. Ken Barris is a craftsman – chiselling away at each sentence until it gleams with understated elegance.

Three stand-out stories are the titular "The Life of Worm", "The Olive Schreiner Stall" and "Poor William". The raw emotion in each is familiar and discomfiting.

In the first, we see a man imprisoned in his own paranoia. His house is a fortress and his dog is a beast; yet he still feels unsafe and simmers with rage at something as innocuous as a tree.

In the second, a victim of necklacing tries to reach out to the living from beyond the grave. He fails, in life and in death, to make connections. In "Poor William", a man comes across a talking ape in his kitchen. This is a complex story, signalling how chance encounters can alter our perceptions forever.

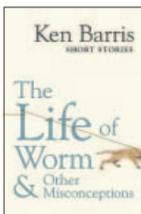
The opening story, "To See the Mountain", about a writers' retreat in Cameroon, introduces writing as a major theme. The narrator and his friend wish to see a nearby mountain up close, and embark on a pilgrimage to get near it. Very little writing

gets done, as in "The Grand Parade" when a writer sets up a makeshift office in a busy marketplace in Cape Town and witnesses the cruelty and desperation of humans, himself included.

The idea of writing as something that happens under pressure, and perhaps under siege, crescendos in "Really into Timeshare", where readers can no longer afford to buy whole books and must settle for a few pages at a time.

The mood of the stories is at times gentle and melancholic, like a simple yet exquisite meal that lingers on your palate hours after the plates have been cleared. The collection imparts invaluable knowledge on writing, writers, history, culture, nature, relationships, and the human condition. 📖

Anna Stroud @annawriter_



Book Bites

Gather the Daughters ★★★★★
Jennie Melamed
Tinder Press, R275



Melamed's fictional world can be read as a dark allegory of patriarchy. Her central characters are children living on an island in a religious community cut off from "the wastelands" – the wider world into which only select male elders, the "wanderers", may venture to bring back supplies and recruits. On the surface this is a gentle, pastoral life, but every time a girl is born, the women wail and weep. The island way is to give fathers free access to their daughters until the girls reach "fruition". Far from looking forward to the day when they can kick dad out of their beds, the daughters dread it because it signals no more summers of freedom. Until puberty, children run unfettered for a quarter of the year, roaming the island in naked, muddy packs. When one of these wildlings sees something she shouldn't, it triggers a rebellion led by a 17-year-old who has staved off menstruation by starving herself. Melamed tells a stirring story in lucid, luminous language. 📖 Sue de Groot @deGrootS1

Grace ★★★★★
Barbara Boswell
Modjaji Books, R250

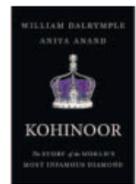


This gripping story tells of how a woman from Cape Town was subjected to abuse from her father, who killed her mother. Later in life, Grace thinks she has

overcome her hideous childhood until two people from her past make a reappearance in her life. Her suburban lifestyle is on the brink of collapse and it is only Grace that can save herself. The graphic details of the abuse that Grace endures is chilling. Her relationship with her father, and how she thinks she has "beaten" her past, makes the story so relatable and even more worthy of a reread. This book has earned every one of its five stars. 📖 Jessica Levitt @jesslevitt

Koh-i-Noor: The History of the World's Most Infamous Diamond ★★★★★

William Dalrymple & Anita Anand
Bloomsbury, R275



The Koh-i-Noor brings out so many angry emotions, because it is at the centre of important historical issues: why is it still part of the crown jewels of England? Where does it belong? Dalrymple and Anand investigate the history, dismissing the mythology around the diamond. What they find, is what one suspected – there has been misappropriation by all sorts, along with plenty of torture and murders. 📖 Jennifer Platt @Jenniferdplatt