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When Morning Comes

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

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Media type:

Book

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The year is 1976. The place is Johannesburg. The Baas Law-forcing black students who had been learning most of their subjects in English to switch to learning in Afrikaans, the dominant language of the ruling National Party, was about to be enforced. Nelson Mandela was in prison. Students decided they could wait no longer and rose in revolt. Behind the bald historical statements were real people, struggling to live their lives, to make a future for themselves and for their country. It is these students who speak through the pages of this affecting novel.

The narrative is shared by Zanele, who is skipping school and plotting against the apartheid government; Thabo, her best friend who has become a gangster but who owes money to a dangerous man; Meena, an Indian girl working in her father's shop who finds political pamphlets which lead her to Zanele; and Jack, a white boy from a wealthy family with a future at Oxford University and a life far away from the troubles of his riven country. Slowly and inexorably they are drawn together, their lives linked both by love and politics.

Raina, herself from Johannesburg, has an unwaveringly sure touch in conveying the contrasting details of their lives - poverty and wealth, control and subjugation, bloodshed and fear - and the result is an utterly convincing picture of the social, physical and emotional horrors of this volatile era. The love between Zanele and Jack should be doomed, yet survives. The carnage resulting from the student revolt which Zanele helps to organise is a blood-price for what must be done to win freedom. The ties of friendship hold through life-threatening danger and there is a glimpse of that hope which was eventually realised with the release of Nelson Mandela.

This is a tense, brutal book which has much to teach. As many readers as possible should step forward to learn.

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