



Hugh Lewin Talking

Article Author:

[Hugh Lewin](#) [1]

[34](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

The creator of **Jafta** talks about his life and books.

Hugh Lewin is best known in this country as the author of the **Jafta** books. The events that led to the writing of these stories are less well-known and are closely linked to Hugh Lewin's own life and to the recent political history of South Africa.

<!--break-->

He talked to us about these events, about his books for children and about working with Lisa **Kopper**.

Talking about his life

Hugh Lewin was born in 1939 in the East Transvaal where he grew up. His father was an Anglican missionary priest so he had what he calls 'the usual good white education - private schools with 50% off the fees'. In the fifties, towards the end of his time at school he became politically involved for the first time through his Sunday visits to Trevor Huddleston's mission in Sophiatown - one of the black townships near Johannesburg, demolished when the government moved all the black population to Soweto. Suddenly he realised that there were blacks in South Africa and began to understand something of their situation. As a student at Rhodes University he was active in the academic freedom campaign in opposition to the government's Separate Universities Bill which went through in 1960 and completely changed the nature of Fort Hare - sister college to Rhodes - which had until then been the main black university in South Africa.

He associated himself with Alan Paton's Liberal Party which was open, non-racial and stood for universal franchise. After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 it declared itself strongly for non-violence; but the 1960 emergency produced a different response from other political groups banned at this time. Years of passive resistance on Ghandian lines had produced only further repression; the armed struggle was born and the armed wing of the banned African National Congress was formed.

After Rhodes University, trying to complete an Honours degree, Hugh Lewin taught for a time in a prep school and then moved into newspapers working on a black township tabloid and on **Drum** magazine, the main black magazine in South Africa. In 1962 he was approached by a friend and asked to join an underground group involved in protest sabotage - blowing up electricity pylons, railway lines, creating social disruption without directly attacking people. His response was unequivocal. 'The fact that I had been considered sufficiently trustworthy to be approached meant that I didn't have any option. Because someone has approached you they have laid themselves on the line; you could go and report them and they would go to gaol. There wasn't really any question; I had to join.'

It was a small group which he describes as 'totally amateurish, a bunch of intellectuals'; unusually it was multi-racial. They had a number of successful attacks, pausing only in 1963 during the period of the trial of Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress leaders who were finally sentenced to life imprisonment. Shortly after the trial another

wave of sabotage activities led to mass arrests by the police. The national organiser of Hugh Lewin's group was arrested in Cape Town and began to give the police names. News that people were being picked up came at night to Johannesburg with a friend who had escaped from Cape Town. They spent the night getting groups out to Bechuanaland (Botswana) and Swaziland. At four in the morning there was an opportunity for Hugh Lewin to go too. 'I didn't feel I could leave. I was alone; I had no ties. Other people were in gaol; I thought I should stay too.'

He was arrested, detained under the ninety day law and tortured by the security police. During his detention another saboteur planted a bomb at Johannesburg station which killed three people. 'It was exactly the kind of thing we had been working against; we didn't want loss of life.' The fact that he and his fellow detainees could not have been involved in this action didn't prevent the Special Branch from retaliating by inflicting terrible beatings on them. In December 1964 he was charged under the Sabotage Act and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He describes this sentence as 'very light in the circumstances. What happened to me was like getting a parking ticket compared to the experiences of other whites and the blacks and coloureds on Robin Island.' Nevertheless his matter-of-fact account of his time in prison does not make comfortable listening.

Because of his father he was able to secure a British passport and, with the help of Helen Suzman, at the end of his sentence he secured a Permanent Departure Permit and left South Africa at the end of 1971. Arrived in England he met a friend from home working here as a lawyer. Within a year they were married and now live with their two daughters, Thandi (11) and Tessa (9) in Zimbabwe, where Hugh Lewin, as well as writing, is involved in training journalists and editing manuals about publishing. He supports the armed struggle in South Africa as the only way in which freedom is going to come. The experience in Mozambique and Zimbabwe he believes make it an unfortunate but inevitable reality.

It is with a nice sense of irony that he reports on the publishing history of the **Jafta** books in South Africa. 'I wasn't banned before I was arrested and because I was leaving the country they didn't ban me when I came out of prison. The Jafta books have been published there in English for some time; there were plans to release them in paperback in five languages but that seems sadly not to be happening now. However they are being done in *one* other language - Afrikaans.'

Talking about books

Starting to write for children

The Jafta books in one way are a direct result of Hugh Lewin's time in prison.

'At one point my wife, Pat, said to me, "Some time you are going to have to explain to your children that you were in gaol not for being a rapist or a murderer or a thief but for a particular reason." And when the kids were about three or four I began to think of some ideas about how to put this across and scribbled down some stories about a character who has to explain why his father who is a political prisoner is in gaol. I called the character Japhta after a student friend of mine from Fort Hare. He was not very political but being president of the Student Council at a time of political turmoil he was driven into a position where he had to take a lead. After he got his B.Ed he was hounded by the Special Branch, even when he went to teach in Lesotho. In the end he committed suicide. That's one of the crimes of apartheid, it forces so many people into unnatural situations. My friend Japhta's father was a herdsman and he grew up in a village. A missionary took him up and gave him an education. I admired him tremendously - the books are a kind of memorial to him.'

Working with Lisa Kopper

The Jafta books might never have been published had Hugh Lewin not met Lisa Kopper.

'The anti-apartheid movement did a book to describe something of what it is like to be a child in Soweto. Lisa did a set of beautiful black and white etchings to go with the text. I got involved with the printing of it. I'd just begun to scribble down ideas for the Japhta stories; Lisa was doing her first book with Evans and she took my stories to Josie Karavasil, her editor. Josie suggested a series of four books about a family, mainly on the strength of some superb illustrations that

Lisa had done for the stories. The books were to have twelve double spreads each with 28 words of my text. The three of us worked very closely together. It was very useful for me as an apprentice writer to work with Lisa. If the text didn't work in terms of the drawing we needed she would scream at me and make me find something else. That was fine. Particularly with books where the essence is really the illustrations the writer shouldn't feel proprietorial about the words. Text and pictures need to tie up so closely that the artist is as important and often more important than the writer even though the writer has the original idea. I found it very challenging to write the **Jafta** stories, much more so than writing, as I had, about my prison experiences which was just chipping away at a mountain of recollections. Having to tell the story in 28 words per spread was an exercise in writing poetry - trying to distil down into a basic essence. That means that a lot of what is in my mind is implicit in the text; Lisa manages to express it completely in the pictures. What is even more exciting is the way she takes the text and works in all sorts of other ideas herself with a tremendous amount of humour. She's amazing - she's never been to Africa, everything she's done had been from references but she's very knowledgeable and she's got tremendous empathy and understanding.'

More about Jafta

^In the end the prison story never appeared in the **Jafta** books.

Right up until just before the books were published there was a spread in which the father was away in gaol and a political prisoner. The problem was that the books are for very young children and contain fairly simple concepts. Everyone said there wasn't enough material in the book to explain to the children what this was all about nor to make it possible for adults to explain the situation to children. Eventually I caved in and said, "Right, we'll make him a migrant worker in the city." And in a sense that became a far more general universality in the South African context in wider political terms than people being in prison for political reasons.

Publishing **Jafta** at all was very courageous. The idea was to give some flavour of life in Africa to young children. I find writing for children is difficult. I don't approach it from the point of view that children are not going to understand things. They are very receptive to new ideas and concepts. I try to write about things that will interest and engross them. I've been criticised by teachers for not using language in ways they approve. But my experience is that children are tremendously excited by language; they are not scared of the new, it's adults who are scared of the new.

I think children like patterns and I've tried to give each **Jafta** book its own pattern; in *My Mother* it's a day, sunrise to sunset; in *My Father* it's the four seasons; *The Wedding* is a week and *The Journey* is different forms of transport.'

New books and future plans

Hugh Lewin's latest book is *An Elephant Came to Swim*.

^This is very much a Zimbabwe story. The idea arose out of a tale we were told while staying at a broken-down motel near Kariba on the northern border of Zimbabwe. One day an elephant had strayed into the hotel, got into the swimming pool, had a high old time and disappeared back into the bush. I suppose it's unlikely but it *could* happen in any slightly remote place in southern Africa; there are signs on the roadside, Beware Elephant. I've given my story a romantic happy ending but with this book and the **Jafta** books I've tried to make the characters real, true to their setting and to show them as people with problems, reactions and feelings. Lisa has done the pictures again. It's been more difficult now that we are thousands of miles apart but she understands that being Zimbabwe it looks very different from South Africa. Her drawings are magnificent, full of warmth and liveliness. This book is in full colour which I'm afraid will make it expensive for Africa - **Jafta** is in duotone, dark and light brown which makes it much cheaper to produce.

There are two more **Jafta**'s planned. Bell and Hyman who took over Evans want to continue with the series. There is still a great deal that needs to be told about life in South Africa. I'd also like to write a story about an older African girl showing some of the realities for women in Africa. And I still haven't written the book which will explain about fathers being political prisoners. Probably because I do other things I don't think of myself as a children's writer and I've been criticised as a white person writing about black Africa. I think looked at in one way it is racist. But I'm concerned about

presenting the African experience to my children and to other white children like them. What they have to realise is that Africa is a majority black continent. What I'm doing by writing about the lives of a large number of black friends of mine is describing something of just that.'

Hugh Lewin - the books

The Jafta series - published in hardback by Evans/Bell and Hyman (£3.50); in paperback by Dinosaur (95p).

Jafta, 0 237 45543 9, (hbk); 0 85122 267 6, (pbk)

Jafta: My Mother, 0 237 45544 7, (hbk); 0 85122 268 4, (pbk)

Jafta: My Father, 0 237 45545 5, (hbk); 0 85122 397 4, (pbk)

Jafta: The Wedding, 0 237 45546 3, (hbk); 0 85122 398 2, (pbk)

Jafta: The Journey, 0 237 45676 1, (hbk)

Jafta: The Town, 0 237 45677 X, (hbk)

An Elephant Came to Swim, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11432 2, £5.95.

Page Number:

8

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/34/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/hugh-lewin-talking>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/hugh-lewin>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/34>