

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 74: Nelson Mandela

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Elleke Boehmer 00:26

My name is Elleke Boehmer, and I'm the Professor of World Literature in English in the English faculty at the University of Oxford. I'm the author of the Very Short Introduction to Nelson Mandela that I'm going to talk a bit about today. I'm very excited about this book, which came out in its first edition 15 years ago, and now in its second edition this coming autumn. That timing is intentional because we are marking this year, the end of the year, the 10th anniversary of the death of the great, first democratic president of South Africa. And so we thought it was a really good time to take a retrospective look back at the life and legacy of Mandela.

Elleke Boehmer 01:24

If I was to give three key points about my research on Nelson Mandela, I'd say probably, first, that my work uniquely sets reflections on Mandela's political and ethical legacy within the full story of his long and remarkable life. He lived to 95. And then second, I'd say that my work gives a fresh and far-reaching insight into his vital contribution to the achievement of democracy in his country, South Africa, as leader of the African National Congress for many decades, and then as first democratic president, but that I also look at his achievement of values of reconciliation and reciprocity worldwide as well. But then, and this would be my third point, my work also considers Nelson Mandela's flaws and mistakes alongside his charisma, and these include his egotism, his delight in playing to the crowd in seeking attention, and then, also, his critics would say, in seeking racial reconciliation, in South Africa, at all costs.

Elleke Boehmer 02:49

Now I've been thinking about and fascinated by Mandela for a long time, really, from when I was a student in the anti-apartheid movement. And Nelson Mandela was at that time, this was the late 1980s, Nelson Mandela was at that time, still in political

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 74: Nelson Mandela

imprisonment on Robben Island, in South Africa. And he was, perhaps, one of the world's most famous political names, but he was also a man without a face. No photographs of Mandela had emerged into the public domain outside of the prison. And so we really didn't know what he looked like; he had last been seen in 1962. Also, I was born in South Africa, so I relate to the topic of Nelson Mandela, and the great question of Nelson Mandela's legacy, at a very visceral level. I've always been inspired by his political generosity, and the more so since he walked into freedom in early 1990. I've also been very impressed by, and have thought a lot about, and, and I've written about this, about his ability to read a political situation in the round. He would address political conflicts very much as he would a chess game; he was a keen chess player. And he liked to walk around the board and look at the situation on the chessboard, that battle of one side against the other, from all angles.

Elleke Boehmer 04:34

With my research on Mandela, there are several aspects that I'm trying to communicate and that I focus on. One is that Mandela was for a period of time the world's one, great, good man, and I'm thinking there of the 1990s into the new millennium. He was an internationally recognizable symbol, who seemed at one level flawless, heroic, and saintly, but he was also, from the time that he was a young hot-headed politician, but even into his old age, he was also a very contradictory figure and, himself, often internally conflicted. He believed in democracy, but he always, as he said himself, liked to lead from the front. He was a party man, and a smitten husband, and a devoted father, but he also often seemed ruthless and distant in his personal relations. And at the same time, perhaps too willing to overlook the often quite grave errors of others, including, of course, those of his famous first wife, the equally charismatic, Winnie Mandela. And then, also, on his release from 27 and a half years of political imprisonment, he was perhaps too concerned to move quickly to reconciliation, and also to courting the approval of the Western world, Britain and the United States, and to, therefore, preserving the economic status quo in South Africa, leaving white minority and minority black capital in charge. So the old bosses really in charge.

Elleke Boehmer 06:15

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 74: Nelson Mandela

His critics definitely say that he gave too much away politically, and became a kind of stooge of the West. This is something that I look at very closely in this new work. And I come to some new conclusions about Mandela's incredible ability to hold and balance political differences, and to look at a conflict from different points of view. He believed fundamentally in reciprocity, that idea that he shared with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that none of us can be well, if we can't all be well together.

Elleke Boehmer 06:54

Still thinking about some of the key points that have been raised by my recent work on Nelson Mandela, a challenge that I found particularly difficult to address, and that I spent a lot of time thinking about, was the fall of Mandela's reputation, which happened in the 2010s, not long after his death, which was really quite surprising. So he died in December 2013, and he was given a state funeral, and shrines cropped up around South Africa, at street corners and in shopping malls and outside small village shops. Everybody seemed to be regretting and mourning the passing of this great leader, the first democratic president. But all of that quite rapidly changed within about two years, with the rise of the, first the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which was a critique of the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes, in South Africa, and then also the student movement #FeesMustFall, where students were protesting at the cost of their higher education. And Mandela suffered from these attacks on the reputation of previous towering figures in South African history. Mandela had agreed to couple his name to a scholarship fund, the Mandela Rhodes Scholarships.

Elleke Boehmer 08:46

And so when questions were raised about the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes, questions were also raised about Mandela, who was seen simply to have made too many compromises with the white elite embodied in the figure of Cecil John Rhodes. That's something that I tackle hard in my work. And I come to some, I think, to me, interesting conclusions about ways in which Mandela valorized, kind of put on a pedestal, the idea of national unity in South Africa, at almost any cost. And I assessed that in the round, and, I suppose, I come down, in the end, to offering the thought that was perhaps, in itself, a noble goal, that division is always less good than people reconciling and coming together, especially after so many decades of conflict and division and bloodshed, racially torn conflict in the

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 74: Nelson Mandela

country. So that was a, that was a pretty interesting challenge and one that I spent a lot of time working my way through.

Elleke Boehmer 10:07

So I hope very much that what I've been saying here has sparked your interest in the topic of Nelson Mandela and his legacy into the 2020s. I've certainly been delighted to return to and reflect further on the topic of Mandela. I think I've come to some rather different conclusions than I did before. But my regard and respect for Nelson Mandela remains undimmed. If anything, I'm finally even more impressed by his legacy of audacious reconciliation and generous reciprocity than I was before.

The VSI Podcast Outro 10:48

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