



The Covenant

James A. Michener

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Set in South Africa, beginning 15,000 years ago and ending with the Boer War, this is a novel about people caught up in the march of world history. It is a story of adventure and heroism, love and loyalty, and cruelty and betrayal.

The Covenant Details

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Author : James A. Michener

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From Reader Review The Covenant for online ebook

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

I never believed I could understand the complicated, bloody, perplexing history of South Africa. Leave it to Michener to prove me wrong. This was published in 1980. I wish Jimmy was still around to provide a follow-up from 1980 to the present.

1235 pages! And it only took me 8 1/2 weeks. This is my big accomplishment for the year. It may even be the longest book I've ever read. If I don't get through anything else on my 2011 challenge shelf, that will be okay.

Lys says

A bible of a book - both in terms of size and contents - that retells the history of South Africa through the stories of both fictitious and historic characters. A truly ambitious endeavour in true Michener style, which had a profound effect on me when I read it at the age of 16 - and still does! The book ends in the 1980s, and I am still amazed at Michener's insight into the shaping of post-apartheid South Africa.

Johnny D says

I promised myself when I considered writing a review of this gigantic tome ...

Woah there buddy, isn't it a little redundant to be calling a tome gigantic? If it's a tome it is gigantic by its very definition, or are you saying that it's especially large, even for a tome?

Alright, so when I was considering writing a review of this tome, I made a promise to myself not to use the word epic.

Newsflash, genius, you are writing a review and you just used the word epic. Mission failed, promise to self broken (you suck).

... Anyway, I did not want to use the word epic to describe this novel, but I realized that there isn't another word that would describe it adequately.

Oh look, I have a thesaurus. Check it out: Inflated, grandiose, gargantuan, monumental, towering, gigantic, Brobdingnagian ...

Sooo, this is a big book and if you're not interested in South African history, it might not be something you want to read.

Durrr, hey I'm not interested in reading about South African history, I think I'll read this monstrous (thank you, thesaurus) Michener book that focuses entirely on South Africa. IS ANYONE THAT STUPID?

Yes, as a matter of fact ...

But do you think that anyone reading your review is that stupid?

Of course not, they're obviously individuals of highly evolved taste and intelligence. I just thought that maybe they don't know what the book is about.

Do you honestly believe that someone interested in this book went to YOUR review first? Like, oh hey, I'm just going to read this random review by a dude I don't know rather than reading the BLURB THAT IS RIGHT BESIDE THE BLOODY BOOK.

You may have a point.

You're dern right I have a point, you soft-headed cheese eater.

Cheese eater?

You don't eat cheese?

I do, but it's a rather weak insult.

Whatever

Anyway, this book is a long read, but it's well worth the time invested. In my opinion, this is Michener's best.

Have you read every Michener book?

No.

Then how can you say that? What if his best book is "Mexico"?

It isn't.

Listen, you lumpy-headed simpleton, can you guarantee beyond all doubt that one of the many Michener books that you haven't read isn't his best?

No, but ...

Then your opinion isn't worth much, is it?

Fine. I just thought this was a really good book and, having read a sizable selection of Michener's works, I have a hard time imagining a better one.

Oh, so we're to be held hostage, as review readers, by the limits of your poverty-stricken imagination?

Fine. This is an excellent book, that's all I'm saying.

I think what the reviewer is trying to say, for any readers who have made it this far, is that you should probably read another review if you want any actual meaningful analysis of this book

Shut up.

Shane says

A panoramic novel, spanning centuries, where the tragic heroine is Mother South Africa, whose children are unable to live together in peace. I wish my school history books had been written like this, with the insertion of fictional characters to bring story and life into what is normally a dull narrative.

After a preface on the early Bushman who inhabited the land since pre-historic times, the story follows the lineage of the Afrikaner Van Doorn, English Saltwood and Zulu Nxumalo families, from the arrival of the first Europeans in the mid 17th century to the end of the 1970's. Dominant members of each of these families shape and are shaped by the history of the country. There are dozens of stories within this book, tragic, dramatic, humorous and downright inhuman, all extremely interesting and well rendered. The intent of the novel in its 1100 pages seems to be to capture the history South Africa and therefore we see characters enter and exit quickly along with their stories, with only a few like Tjaart and Detleef Van Doorn, Hillary and Laura Saltwood, Jonathan and Daniel Nxumalo and the timeless General Paulus De Groot leaving larger footprints than their relatives.

The clash of white and black cultures is evident from the beginning when the Europeans land in Cape Town in the mid 17th century and migrate north as far as the boundary with Zimbabwe over generations, while the blacks in the form of the resident Hottentots, the Xhosa from across the Great Fish River, and their northern Zulu cousins separated by the Drakensburg range, all drift south seeking boundless grazing land for their herds. The Dutch Afrikaner and his nomadic cousin, the Boer, are portrayed as fierce, independent individuals, willing to fight against insurmountable odds, who in their Calvinistic faith believe that this land was given to them, by God's covenant and that like the different colours of jelly, the various colours of race shouldn't mix. The English, who arrive in 1805, are more interested in empire and the abolition of slavery, while the blacks simply want their land back, and the Coloureds reflect the sin of miscegenation. Mixed in with the fictional characters are real life individuals, three in particular: Shaka of the Zulu, Cecil Rhodes and Lord Kichener, men who never married, wreak havoc in the country in their misguided intention of maintaining order.

Loyalties shift between the ethnic groups during each generation as they jockey for pole position. There is even a time when the Afrikaners throw in their lot with the Germans during the two world wars of the 20th century to be rid of the British, while the Xhosa starve themselves to death under the illusion that the Russians are coming to their aid after the Crimean War. The British are no better and open concentration camps at the end of the Boer War where many women and children die of typhoid, dysentery and other diseases.

All this evolution only leads to South Africa's darkest phase, when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party gains control in 1948 and institutes a form of Nazism called Apartheid. Horrible things happen during this time: whites have to carry Life Books with them detailing every incident in their life to protect their racial purity, Coloureds are to be deprived of their vote, blacks are given "Bantustans" (segregated homelands), transgressors of any colour are "banned" from public life indefinitely, and suspicion rules the land – for instance, the lack of freckles could imply that you are Coloured. The irony is that when racial investigations are initiated, even the "purest of the pure" are found to have some miscegenation somewhere up their family tree, making the whole issue of racial purity, in a land where early European male settlers could not find wives easily, a bit of a joke.

It's a pity that Michener ends his narrative in 1979, with Apartheid at its worst, with scores of the best and brightest fleeing the country for places like Canada and Australia, with blacks massing for revolution over in Mozambique, and with 400 years of evolution leading the country only to its worst boiling point. God's Covenant, indeed - Calvin would be turning in his grave!

We all know that Apartheid ended in the 1990's and South Africa still lurches trying to find its feet under its new balance of power, and therefore this story has no ending, yet. Michener shows hope however, when he parallels Phillip Saltwood's tireless search for diamonds, which finally yields the possibility of a find, to the search for peace in the land by its various leaders who are mining for diamonds in their fellow citizens' souls.

As for the fate of the panoramic novel, I think it has less hope than South Africa has, given the shrinking of attention spans these days. I took nearly a month to finish this book, engrossing though it was, and am unlikely to pick up another Michener tome for a long time to come. Mich would have to drastically alter his writing strategy were he still alive today.

Carolyn says

4.5 stars

When I realized this was a formidable book of almost 1200 pages I postponed reading it for several weeks. Once I started it I was fascinated by the brutal and bloody history of this beautiful country. The story is told through the lives, actions and beliefs of three extended, multigeneration families, (fictional but with some actual events) and gave me more insight as to how the reviled system of apartheid came to be. There is an Afrikaaner family (an amalgamation of mainly Dutch, Huguenot and German), an English family and a Zulu family whose history is told from their beginnings in South Africa. We also learn of the fate of the Xhosa tribe, indigenous people such as the San (Bushman) and Hottentots.

Fanatical and firmly held religious beliefs considered the Blacks inferior in ability, fit only as servants or for menial labour by the Whites. The Coloured (people of mixed race) were considered tainted by the sexual sins of their ancestors and were confined to certain jobs and separate living areas. Blacks saw their homes bulldozed and sent to segregated areas. Chinese were brought in as cheap labour, and then expelled. Indians were also considered beneath the white settlers, and limited in where they lived and what they achieved. Gandhi shows up as a stretcher bearer during the Boer War.

The Afrikaaners mostly believed they had a covenant with God to rule this country and their religious beliefs gave them the right to subject and enslave people they considered inferior. The English wanted South Africa as part of the British Empire, and bloody wars were fought with heroic actions on both sides. Sometimes their native servants accompanied them into battle fields, and there were also wars with the Zulus.

The thoughts and actions of the books characters gave me better insight into this gorgeous, troubled country, more than history books could convey. Some of the fictional characters are based on real people and events. Throughout the book we also read about real historical characters. It added to my enjoyment to look up their photos and biographies on the internet, and also pictures and maps of the places mentioned.

The book was published in 1979 when apartheid was in force, positions of wealth and power were confined to the whites, other people were disfranchised, Blacks were seeing their homes bulldozed and being sent to hovels outside the city, anyone of any race considered an agitator could be banned or imprisoned and/or tortured.

I wish there had been an addition to the book for the rapid events which occurred in starting with President de Klerk negotiating with Mandela while he was imprisoned in 1990, the dismantling of apartheid, and

universal voting rights, the release of Mandela from prison and his ascent to the Presidency. Would have liked to know how the book's characters thought and reacted to these changes in the structure of their society. At the end of the book it was suggested that it would take much time and patience and maybe a war for these changes to take place, and maybe their grandchildren would live to see what actually happened within 14 years of the publication of the Covenant.

Becky says

My favorite Michener. The story behind South Africa. And when I say behind, that is truly Michener's style. He starts with the beginning of time, how the earth was formed, the first people to populate the area, and on to the present day. An incredible amount of information, but entertaining to read as he masterfully follows several families whose lives cross again and again over centuries.

Erin says

BORING! My dad gave me this book before I left the U.S. to study in South Africa. I got a third of the way through before finally giving up. I love to read and rarely stop reading in the middle, but I found it very difficult to commit to The Covenant. The history is interesting and useful and has been a good companion to my travels in this country, but ultimately the characters are one-dimensional, and the stories seem forced, rather than developing in an organic way. The author seemed more interested in writing a history textbook than a novel, and only took a cursory stab at describing the characters making their ways through their social spheres. At no point did I emphasize with any character; instead I was forced by Michener to view them from a distance, which I think diffuses his whole purpose of making history accessible and immediate to a large audience. Overall, I would have rather read a history textbook; then I would at least know what I was getting into.

Stephen says

It was very interesting to read this book which ended in 1980. As of 2009 we can now look back at what happened to South Africa and it is wonderful to see that of the 2 scenario's that Michener thought most likely the (relatively) bloodless one emerged. I especially enjoyed his section on South Africa under apartheid. It is a reminder to me of how stupid, brutal and ineffective it was a system. The whites now like to complain about Affirmative Action and BEE but looking at the system that we put the blacks under it is enough to make us ashamed. That is not to say that we shouldn't strive to make South Africa a better place for all, we should just realise where our young democracy comes from and gasp in horror and what we did mentally, physically to the majority of our population. Not to say the least about our education and skills development of the black population. What a disgrace! One should read this book just to see what a farce Apartheid was.. The book as a whole kind of rambled on through 1000 pages of the history of South Africa. I obviously was interested in the subject matter, but on the whole the book is not that exciting. It is kind of a slow meander with highlights of our history and I enjoyed it as such..

Nancy Chappell says

I know some consider Michener a lightweight - in fact I don't know anyone else who enjoys reading him - but I have enjoyed learning a bit more about complicated social histories of a particular area. Piecing together the history of the Xhosa, Zulu and other natives in southern Africa, as well as the Dutch and English colonisers was very interesting to me. I am more inclined to read such a book with human stories (if fictitious), than to pick up a non-fiction on the history of So. Africa. Anyone else out there enjoy Michener?

Sally Seymore says

This is not a new book, but I'm glad I've found it as James Michener is a master storyteller. In history classes we were taught drips and drabs of our history, so it was interesting to see how it all fits together. This historical novel is obviously based on fact, but the author's own storyline is cleverly interwoven. It gives one a comprehensive account of how South Africa came into being, the different role players involved as well as the dynamics of this multi-cultural and multi-faceted country. A must for those who wish to understand this complex country.

Christine Ward says

The last time I read this book was about six years ago, and I remember thinking that Michener was overly sympathetic to the Afrikaners, and thus, to their cause - apartheid. Finding that morally repugnant, I decided I was done with this book and done with Michener.

Currently, I'm experiencing a Michener-revival, and after watching "Invictus", thought I'd give this book another try.

Like all Michener books, this is incredibly well-researched, and very involved, with characters that span hundreds of years. Some of those characters' descendants will turn up in the story later on; others do not. However, like most Michener books I've read, this is also a fascinating read - and, as I discovered this round, not necessarily sympathetic to the Afrikaners and their cause.

I think Michener demonstrates sympathies to all groups he writes about, and this book is no exception. It is true that much of this book is devoted to Afrikaner families, but that is to be expected of a book about South Africa. The reader should also take into consideration that this was written in 1979, and even if some characters espouse repugnant views, those are not necessarily the views of the author.

I don't think this is Michener's best novel - I'd say Hawaii, followed closely by The Source - are his best works, but this is certainly a book worth reading.

I'm glad I re-read this. If you like historical fiction, you probably will be too.

Jonathan Dunsky says

James Michener's epic book on South-Africa. It tells the story of that land from the early settlements by the Dutch, through the expansion of it by English immigrants and others, to the South-Africa of the Apartheid age, shortly before it was eliminated.

The tumultuous and violent history of South Africa is told with Michener's careful research and adherence to detail. The people and their struggles and the values that drove them enrich the story and add the personal touch to the sweeping changes around them.

It is a tragic story of slavery, struggles against elements, racism, war, and love. There are many characters in this novel, as it spans hundreds of years.

You will read about Cecil Rhodes, the rise of the Zulu Empire, the Boer wars and the concentration camps that the British erected during that war.

It also provides a good look at the evil of Apartheid, how it was established, and how many whites in the country knew it could not last.

As with many Michener books, you learn something as you enjoy the great story. This was a fantastic read.

Jacques Bezuidenhout says

tl;dr - Read the book, don't listen to the audio

I listened to the Audiobook (if you can even call it that).

It is actually a 1993 tape recording with a monotonous narrator that cannot pronounce a single word related to the Dutch, Afrikaners, Xhosa, Zulu.

Being about 60 hours of audio, it gets a bit tedious being told to reverse, or turn the tape around every 30 minutes.

And if the narrator wasn't bad enough on his own, you had this static (sea shell) type background throughout the whole book.

I truly cannot fathom why there was no effort made to re-record Michener's books.

With that out of the way. The book was so good, that I ended up ignoring all the narration complaints and spend a month listening to the history of South Africa.

I've never cared much for knowing my history very well.

But was recommended the author by a friend, and figured that if I'm going to engage in the history of any country, it might as well be my own.

And I'm not sorry at all.

At the back of this book, I'm actually quite angry that history doesn't get taught in this type of format at school level. I probably don't know a single person that enjoyed history at school. But being taught in a novel format with relatable characters, I couldn't stop listening and I can recall most of the history with relative accuracy of more or less which years that happened.

The book hit quite close to home. Being an Afrikaner, raised in the Dutch Reformed church, born at the time this book was written. It was in the time when things weren't going that well in South Africa, as the book accurately depicts. And only now do I have a full picture of what lead up was to the different phases of South Africa's evolution.

This book won't be for everyone. You either need to be a big lover of history, or have a direct correlation to

the history of South Africa. Whether that is through the Dutch, the Afrikaner, the Coloureds, the Hottentots, the Huguenots, the English, the Xhosa, the Zulu (or even the German and Indian settlers sent from London).

The story is very much told from each culture's own perspective. Giving a solid understanding of what the differences/misunderstandings were and why. Having the full parallel history through the centuries to see why certain events happened. The main thread also makes the same families lives cross again and again over the centuries.

The second half of the book does slow down the pace quite a bit. And I suspect it might be due to the grim nature of the content. Going into the Zulu war, then the English war, then apartheid.

To summarize the major events/eras I got out of this book:

- Bushmen running into the blacks
- Merchants from Zimbabwe exploring Africa for Rhino horn and gold
- Blacks moving up in Africa to Zimbabwe whom were far advanced in the time
- Travel / Trade between Java, the Spice Islands and the Asian countries
- Dutch travel between Amsterdam and Java having to stop in Cape Town
- Settling in Cape Town to have food/drink for the Dutch travellers
- Dutch exploring/moving into Africa and encounters with the locals
- The start of wine making in South Africa
- The Trek Boers and their beliefs
- Xhosa war
- Zulu war
- British colonisation and war
- Cecil Rhodes and mining
- Jan Smuts with and then against all the other Generals (Piet Retief, de la Rey,
- Paul Kruger
- Apartheid
- Diamonds
- To the point of sending Mandela to Robben Island
- All of which highly centres around religious beliefs

There were certain fascinating facts:

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

It is pretty hard to summarize/review a book of such epic proportion.

I definitely want to read more Michener. I probably just need to give myself a year or so to attempt another audio version.

Alida says

I bought this book for 50 Cents in one of the nicest book stores ever. Too bad it's in Gold Beach, Oregon.

Allison Corin says

This is a difficult book to review. As with all Michener books, it is well researched and written.

Anytime I recommend one of his books, I must verify that the intended reader loves history, loves reading, and is willing to hunker down and delve through slow stories to enjoy the incredible wealth of knowledge that can be gained from his stories. The covenant is no different. To read this story takes a level of patience and desire that most books, even most historical novels, do not require.

That being said, of all the Michener books I have read, I think this may be his finest, especially in terms of how he describes the mindset and motivations of the various groups.

Many of the characters are so unlikable or belligerent that you want to shake some 21st century sense into them, but that's easy to say from my couch in Miami.

This is certainly a study on how NOT to develop and run a diverse, fair society, but that's kind of the point.

It really is too bad that we don't get to see this story through to the end of apartheid; however, if this had been written in 2014 there would undoubtably be future history that readers a hundred years from now would lament not being included.
