

CLARKE'S BOOKSHOP CAPE TOWN

NADIA DAVIDS IS AN AWARD-WINNING PLAYWRIGHT,
AND HAS RECENTLY RELEASED *AN IMPERFECT BLESSING*,
A BOOK ABOUT WALMER ESTATE IN CAPE TOWN



Capeptonians are notorious for personalised (if unintelligible) directions. 'You turn left by the pink building. No, no, I forget the name of the street, but make a right at the stop sign. Then you see a wall, *nê?* With a woman painted on it? Now it's not that road, it's the next one.'

I am guilty of a similarly individualised mapping of the city and I blame it entirely on an early adolescence of Saturdays spent in 'town' following precisely these sorts of storied instructions.

'Town' was shorthand for Cape Town's city centre, a bus ride away. It wasn't far, but it never occurred to me to walk: the bus, with its rattling stops, its top-deck view of the landscape that slipped from the slow nothingness of District Six into the sudden appearance of the technikon, was an integral part of the day. As we neared Buitenkant Street the pale honey-toned limestone of the city hall would become visible. To the right, the stringent walls and lawns of the old castle. A sharp left took us to the Grand Parade's bus depot and that led off to the Golden Acre mall.

In later years, there were cups of acidic coffee at a Greenmarket Square café, followed by walks through the Company's Garden. What is now known as the 'eastern precinct' – a place of museums, performance spaces and artisanal brews – was a hazy bit of geography, mostly empty on weekends.

Today, the bus service has changed and the coffee, thankfully, is infinitely better. And though the charms of Long Street were

appreciated mostly in my twenties, no trip – then or now – is complete without a visit to the gold-lettered, wooden-floored Clarke's.

An independent Southern African specialist bookshop, Clarke's is tightly localised in its focus, allowing visitors access to the minutiae of South African life. Rare books, out-of-print books, second-hand books, impossible-to-find vintage prints all can be found here. It has the gravitas of a library with the ease of an inviting, comfortable lounge.

It fulfils the fantasy of what a bookshop should be and seldom is: a home for books, but also a safe house for ideas (banned books once found refuge), peopled by staff who curate and demonstrate an intimate understanding of the literature they sell.

In the '90s, it was dusty, musty and cramped, though charmingly so. It's moved since (not far, from 211 to 199 Long Street) and it's less dusty, but its ethos remains intact. Clarke's is a Cape Town institution – one that need not be shamefaced about its past and one that understands the importance of cherishing a sense of continuity

between that past and this present.

So here, for what they are worth, are the directions as they were first given to me: 'Stand outside the cathedral facing the hill. Can you see the beginning of the Bo-Kaap a few streets away? Right. Walk up the street. Just keep going. Then before the traffic lights, hang a left. You're on Long Street. Just walk a bit and you'll see a palm tree. After that, you'll get to Clarke's. And when you get to Clarke's, you get to South Africa.' >

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EVERY SOUTH AFRICAN SHOULD GET THERE

BECAUSE... supporting independent bookshops is not just a pleasure, it's an act of good citizenship. Maintain independent bookshops and you maintain independent thinking.

YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO KNOW...

that Anthony Clarke, the shop's eponymous owner, was instrumental in saving *The Resurrection*, a fresco by Italian Renaissance master Piero della Francesca, from destruction in World War II. Clarke, a British officer, ordered his men to hold fire when he remembered that Sansepolcro, the town they were about to bombard, was home to the masterpiece.

WHERE TO STAY

DISTRICT SIX GUESTHOUSE, DISTRICT SIX

Staying at this former slave lodge is like visiting an old Cape Malay aunt – one with a 12-bedroom home overlooking Cape Town harbour. Rooms are modest but tastefully furnished. B&B rates are from R375 per person per night sharing. districtsixguesthouse.co.za, 021-447-0902

CAPE CADOGAN, GARDENS

It's just off Cape Town's lively Kloof Street, but this hotel is a bubble of calm. Bedrooms combine old-world elegance with modern conveniences.

From R1 260 per person per night sharing. capcadogan.co.za, 021-480-8080