



## The Curse and the Cup

**Gaurav Bhalla**

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*Set in apartheid South Africa, a curse, cricket, and a completely original tale highlight this work of sports fiction.*

The international world of sports is in for a treat as Gaurav Bhalla goes behind the scenes and back in time to expose the dirty secrets and triumphant journey of South African cricket during the height and dissolution of apartheid. Incorporating facts, stats, and well-known athletes along with local lore and fictive legend, *The Curse and the Cup* offers a unique and inventive explanation for the decades-long losing streak that shadows the Proteas, South Africa's national cricket team.

Three generations of Lingani men have excelled at the art of left-hand spin bowling, but due to the racial tensions and strict segregation of leagues, none has been able to play for the official South African team. When the end of apartheid dawns and hopes build, an unexpected tragedy leaves the Lingani matriarch, Mama Nonkosi, bitter and angry. Sweeping her grandson, Themba, up in her rage, she weaves a powerful curse, ensuring that the team will never have an international victory. Now Themba must choose whether to continue to feed the curse, or to break free and support South African cricket, fulfilling the dreams of his father and grandfather.

Filled with play-by-play action and commentary worthy of the best sportscasters, *The Curse and the Cup* captures the excitement and high emotion of cheering a favorite team to victory. Although understanding the ins and outs of cricket is not necessary, a certain amount of knowledge would be beneficial in order to follow scoring and game play; newcomers might also be stumped by terms such as wicket and googly.

Avid fans will recognize many professional players' names and many references to matches held over the years. Bhalla takes some liberties with well-known cricketers, particularly A. B. de Villiers, the real-life batsman, wicket-keeper, and captain of the South African One Day International team who plays a small but favorable role in the fictitious story.

Aspiring athletes might be surprised by the amount of effort and number of people needed to give even a truly gifted talent a shot at playing for a professional team. Coaches, sponsors, media, and politics are all factors, adding to the realism of Themba's journey. The result is a highly believable but completely original tale, the ultimate goal of any work of sports fiction.

The titular curse, a result of injustice, grief, and helplessness, takes on a life of its own, and the characters' familiarity with jinxes, curse ceremonies, and omens adds to the unique South African feeling. Foreign words and phrases are mixed in with regularity, some translated fully, some easily intuitable such as *wêreldklas* for "world class," with still more left open to interpretation. Regardless, the language, players, foods, and circumstances all showcase the international, multicultural hotbed that is South Africa.

Followers of cricket, whether fans of India, Australia, or the African teams, will appreciate Bhalla's knowledge of the sport and its history, while the Lingani family's emotional crusade adds a personal and heartfelt element to the often

ruthless and cutthroat world of professional sports.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (January 20, 2015)

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