

The History of Man

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu

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A man learns, too late, the price of colonial ambition in Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's novel *The History of Man*.

From a young age, Emil was encouraged to become “a man of history,” a man who could further the aspirations of empire and make southern Africa a model of Western efficiency. He adopts a paternalistic worldview, doing everything in his power to help “uncivilized” Africans rise to the level of Europeans. Just as his dreams start to come true, they are wrenched out of his control by events that he could, and should, have seen coming. But while the situation may have been unavoidable, his horrifying response to it is his own doing—and his undoing.

Emil is so inspired by tales of colonial heroism and the notion of himself as a grand hero that he remains immune to all attempts to help or better himself. He instead becomes shackled by a rigid form of masculinity: repressed emotions lead to violent outbursts and prolonged silences that destroy his relationships. All the while, he treads what he believes to be a moderate and reasonable path, dismissing the people and viewpoints that could save him.

Emil's limited perspective dooms him to repeat the mistakes of the past—both his country's and his own family's. Though never aware of the full extent of his errors, he knows he has committed wrongs that can never be fixed. The narrative itself maintains a certain sympathy for what he has struggled and suffered through, but even Emil realizes that he does not necessarily deserve this kindness. It is a stinging reminder of the unfairness by which he has benefited his entire life.

With rhythmic prose and sly humor, *The History of Man* tells the story of one man's inevitable failure to live up to his potential.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (January / February 2022)

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