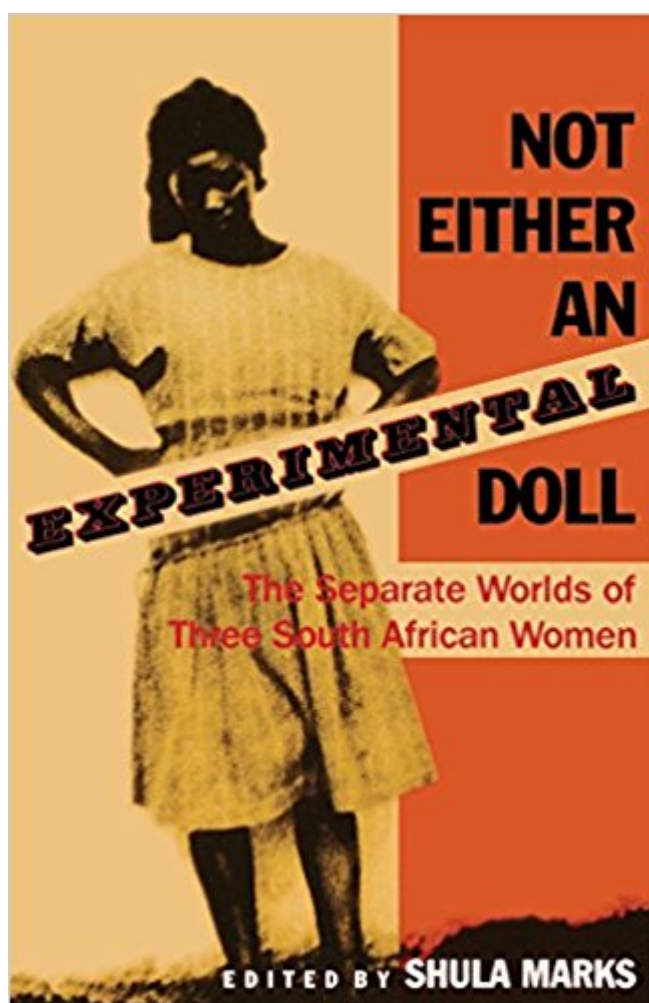


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Not Either An Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds Of Three South African Women



Synopsis

"... remarkable... " *Foreign Affairs*"... illuminates the workings of institutionalized racism through the correspondence of three South African women in the 1940s and 1950s."

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Susan Greenstein, The Women's Review of Books"A riveting and revealing book...one in which few of the characters wear hats that are spotlessly white."

Third World Resources"This rich collection of letters deserves its own reading, as do Shula Marks's bracketing essays. They are invaluable for clarifying the myriad ramifications that the letters raise for African women."

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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Alert: this review contains spoilers!A revealing look into the worlds of three unique women joined by their reverence for education, Not Either an Experimental Doll offers extraordinary insight into the lives of women living in Africa in the mid 20th century through a series of letters shared between Mabel Palmer, Lily Moya, and Sibusisiwe Makhanya. The two main players in the book begin their relationship when Lily Moya, a 15 year old Xhosa girl, writes to Mabel Palmer, a European woman known for her ability to obtain scholarships for young African and Indian girls, in hopes that Palmer will help her find the means to continue her education. Lily is struggling to complete her schooling due to lack of funds and family assistance, as her father died when she was young and her mother left her to find work in another town. At first Palmer is inclined to help because she sees similarities between Moya, who seems so desperate for an education, and herself. Palmer makes all of the necessary arrangements for Lily to attend Adams College, a famous African high school in Natal. Tension begins to develop in the letters between Moya and Palmer, with each finding fault in the other. Mabel Palmer begins to constantly accuse Lily of being selfish and self-centered, while Lily describes herself as feeling depressed and reaches out to Palmer for compassion. Through the compilation of these letters Shula Marks astutely brings many of the issues that were faced by African women in the 1940s and 50s to the forefront of discussion. Changes in society brought about during and after colonialism were increasingly blamed for cases of mental illness in African women. In the epilogue, Marks reveals that Lily Moya suffered from mental health issues, which were hinted at in Moya's letters to Palmer describing feelings of depression. After running away from Adams College, Lily spends much of her life in mental institutions which only further degrades

her condition due to the inadequate care given to black woman in South Africa at that time, and long after. Because not much was known about mental health at this time in South Africa, especially by the general public, Mabel Palmer was unable to properly sympathize with and help Lily Moya. Marks was perhaps too harsh in her critique of Palmer's reaction to Moya, as Palmer was extremely generous to Moya for as long as she could be and did not understand the true reasons behind Lily's repetitive misbehavior. And while Marks criticizes Palmer for constantly trying to plan for Lily's future without always consulting Lily, she is after all only trying to provide direction to someone who seems to be lost on her own. The correspondence in *Not Either an Experimental Doll* also fittingly highlights the gender gap and those rallying against it. Both Mabel Palmer and Sibusisiwe Makhanya prided themselves as unwavering feminists. They excelled in their chosen career paths and provided for themselves throughout their adult lives. They also both strived to help young women improve their positions through education, as in the case of Lily. Marks allows these women's achievements (which are all the more impressive because of the time and conditions under which they were achieved) to be put on display for the world to see through the publication and supplementation of their letters. While these women do not always take the proper actions for Lily's best interests, they do the best they can for her under the given circumstances. This book is an excellent example of the ways in which ill-informed issues, such as mental health, can easily be misinterpreted and brushed aside, especially under oppressive circumstances. The culmination of Lily's state of health and the inattention paid to women at the time make for an enlightening and interesting read.

One of the best books I have ever read!

What a wonderful book! The exchange of letters is nothing less than fascinating. By reading these letters not only does one get a sense of the racial and economic divisions between the writers, but a glimpse is gained into what would be a peculiar exchange of correspondence even now: a seventy-something woman of well-intentioned but often misguided motives and a teenaged girl perplexed with all the rampant emotions and self-absorptions of her age. I cannot stress how important I feel it is to read the introduction by Shula Marks AFTER reading the letter exchange. Anyone who has even a fundamental knowledge of South Africa during this time would do better not to read the intro first. It's better to get caught up in the flow of the letters--and let their story unfold unadulterated. There is an almost voyeuristic aspect to them as they come to their conclusion. I highly recommend this book, and not only to those with an interest in South Africa or Women's History either.

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