

## REVIEW

### Lewis Mash

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# Helen Suzman (*They Fought for Freedom* series)

*The idea that our society's values are in decline is increasingly gaining wide acceptance. Whether criticism is levelled at the highest echelons of the political elite, as with Zwelinzima Vavi's damning accusations of "crass materialism" within the ANC, or at the perceived crumbling of 'traditional' values in poor urban communities afflicted by violence, substance abuse and gangsterism, it can hardly be disputed that South Africa faces a crisis of morality.*

Whatever the origins of this perceived moral decay, South Africans are divided on how to address it. A number of the articles in this edition of Focus propose a greater emphasis on faith-based ethics as the cure to the rot. However, while such value systems are often attractive for their simplicity and clarity, how to implement them in a multi-religious society under secular governance is a far murkier issue. What is, however, clear is that the present generation of young South Africans must cast about widely to find living examples of moral leadership at any level of society.

Where, then, should these young people of the present – and leaders of the future – look for guidance? One answer, paradoxically enough, is to our dark past. This is the small counterbalance South Africa's history offers against the monstrous injustices of apartheid – that those very injustices brought forth from their ordinary lives a few extraordinary individuals who could not simply suffer in silence, or sit back and watch the suffering of others. Maskew Miller Longman's series, *They Fought for Freedom* (whose general editor is John Pampallis) details the lives of those individuals who played pivotal roles in the struggle against apartheid. These men and women possessed such extraordinary moral character that they were prepared to risk life and freedom for what they believed to be right. What better role models for the South Africans of today?

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The latest volume of *They Fought for Freedom* is Gillian Godsell's biography of Helen Suzman. It tells the famed Parliamentarian's story – from the anti-Semitism her father's family faced in pre-revolutionary Russia, through all the decades of her



HELEN SUZMAN (THEY FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM SERIES), by Gillian Godsell  
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struggle against apartheid, to the moment in April 1994 when she and her comrades in that struggle helped to achieve the impossible. It does so in just 50 pages, and in simple language. It's easy to imagine learners for whom reading – and especially reading in English – is still somewhat challenging getting through the text without difficulty.

Despite its simplicity, the book succeeds in providing a detailed and sometimes moving description of Helen's life and work. Godsell has clearly drawn heavily on Helen's autobiography, *In No Uncertain Terms*, for the anecdotes she relates from Helen's life, but she has done so with the confident parsimony of an accomplished writer. As a consequence, *Helen Suzman* is perhaps a more structured and more readable introduction to the life of this great woman than her own autobiography.

Godsell details some of the historical and political context of Helen's many years in Parliament, in the form of boxed asides within the main text. Together with the comprehension questions included at the end of the book, these give it potential as an educational aid. But that is not where the real value of this book lies.

It is tempting for us, as adults, to dismiss literature intended for children, or to think that it provides nothing more than entertainment, or practice for the more significant, adult literature they will read later in life. But that attitude is wrong. Godsell's book is important, not because it brings particular rigour to bear, or because it sheds new light on some aspect of Helen Suzman's life – it doesn't. Instead, it is important precisely *because* of its intended audience. It is important because when the young South Africans who read it face injustice in their own lives, as they surely will, they need look no further for guidance than the story of Helen Suzman, who led a public life grounded not in self-interest or materialism, but in a shrewd and uncompromising sense of right and wrong.

In so lucidly and concisely bringing this remarkable woman to life, Gillian Godsell has made accessible, to those who represent our near future, one of the great role models of South Africa's recent past. For that, she should be both commended and congratulated.