

Don't buy this book



By [Anton Harber](#)

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I do not usually review second-rate books because I see little point. I prefer to encourage writing and reading by focusing on the vast amounts of interesting material on offer.

Today I make a kind of exception. I say "kind of" because the book I want to deal with is not second-rate. It is appalling, an egregious act of publishing.

It is not often I wonder if a book should ever have seen the light of day. Surely every little bit of writing adds something to what we know, even a speck of nourishment in the vast pool of ideas and information?

Not this time. The book I refer to is the biography of Glenn Agliotti by two of his acolytes, Peter Piegl and Sean Newman. It is not just that it is a badly researched, written and constructed book riddled with factual errors - there are lots of books like that, which I ignore.

What I wonder about is the ethics of attempting to profit through a second-rate whitewash of a known despicable scoundrel.

I asked Penguin SA if it had qualms about it, and CE Stephen Johnson was frank: "Profit is not a four-letter word. We have to make money," he said.

Well, times are hard in the book trade. I get that.

Has our national political debate fallen this low?

This is a time when we are compelled by the Zwelinzima Vavi story to think about what we choose to put into the public arena, and what information should remain private.

In a week in which our national politics was again dominated by allegations of rape, extortion and dirty tricks, one had to ask oneself whether this was what one wanted to think about. Is this what our national political debate has been reduced to?

Most journalists entered the profession because they wanted to expose wrongdoing or inform public debate. But this was an unedifying saga, which must have left a bad taste in everyone's mouth.

Like most people, I believe, I consumed the Vavi story with prurient fascination and then felt degraded and disheartened, the more so when the most serious allegations against him were quickly withdrawn.

The argument over what is the right relationship between the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the African National Congress, and the direction of the tripartite alliance, is going to be settled by cheap allegation, underhand manipulation and prudence. One harks back to the rich debates of the early years of democracy about policy and priorities, with a world of opportunity before us.

Now this lends itself to self-righteous moralising about Vavi's behaviour, one that will probably overshadow the man's longstanding reputation for principle and propriety.

Pity the editors

Have pity on editors. In the old days, they were gatekeepers and would have some say over what weight to give such stories. I recall editors taking different decisions about the security police's exposé of Allan Boesak's private life when it was not what one would expect of a religious leader.

But now, with social media, the story is out there, people are talking about it and you cannot ignore it. You might have all sorts of much more important things of long-term consequence to cover, but you have to throw precious resources and space at this stuff. You are left to decide how to frame the story and how to balance it against other stories. You can at least try to keep some perspective.

As a journalist, my instinct is to say that the more that is out in the public arena, the better. I err on the side of exposure and transparency, and the accountability that comes with it. Leadership is about character and if it goes to one's capacity and appropriateness to hold office, the public needs to know. But that cannot mean a free-for-all. The really private stuff does not assist us in making political choices.

As I reach for the morning papers and eagerly consume the next dose of scandal, I can't help feeling sick to the stomach and more than a little disappointed with ourselves.

And that's why I have to say something I don't really like saying: Don't buy the Agliotti book. Your money is better spent on the Lotto, where at least someone might benefit.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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