

# CANVAS Li

Saturday Star

Revealing the custodian of dre

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Chiara Carter peels away the  
conversation with author Ma

**R**emote, Machiavellian, paranoid, brilliant, strategic, bumbling, obscure, technocratic, visionary, denialist, unifier, divisive—all these terms and more have been used to describe President Thabo Mbeki.

However, it is a less dramatic insight by Mbeki's longstanding friend Mel Gooding that biographer Mark Gevisser selects as central to understanding South Africa's controversial leader.

Gooding said: "Perhaps what drives Thabo is the satisfaction of being or doing what was expected of him. It's a very different thing from ambition, but it's an immensely powerful motivation."

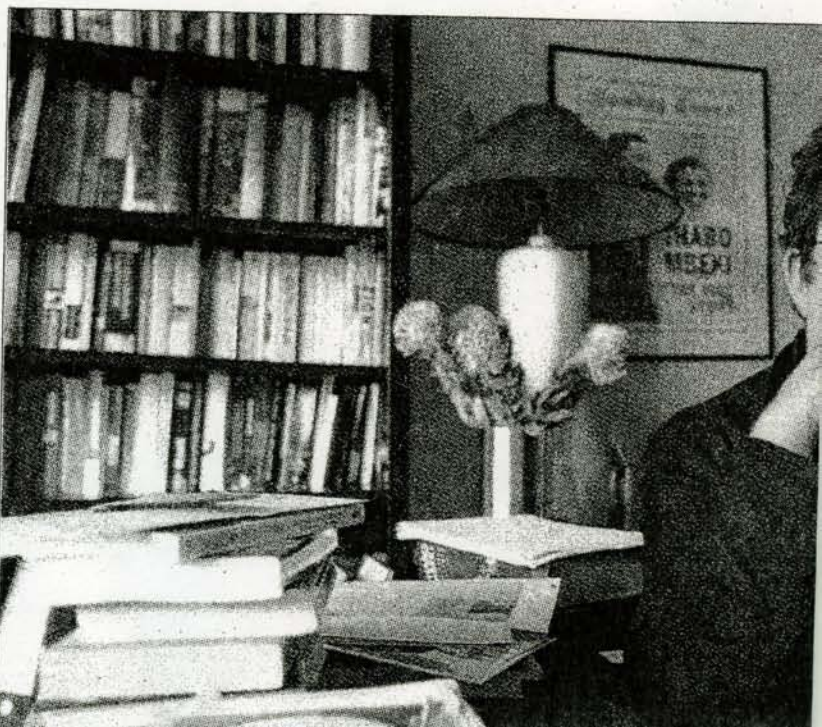
These expectations and how Mbeki has sought through the decades to meet them are outlined in Gevisser's book *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*.

The biography has been long in the writing. Gevisser has spent the past eight years living and breathing the times and life of Mbeki; traversing between past and present from Moscow to Sussex to Pretoria and the countryside of the Eastern Cape. He interviewed the president's colleagues, his family and several former lovers, spending about 20 hours in one-on-one conversations with Mbeki.

Yet, 800-odd pages later, Gevisser is the first to admit he is unable to say definitively that he knows Mbeki, even though he doesn't agree with those who have described the president as "unknowable".

The inspiration to begin the mammoth task arose from Gevisser's desire to explore and chart South Africa's transition through profiling individuals, looking at their life stories as they "negotiated and effected the transition".

And Gevisser is quick to point out that Mbeki was an obvious subject choice.



"He is the most important architect of our society, whether we like it or not, and has governed for the past 15 years," Gevisser said in an interview, his defensive tone perhaps arising from the knowledge of just how much antagonism Mbeki enjoys from certain quarters.

Gevisser said that while he can indeed empathise with Mbeki – otherwise he wouldn't have been able to write the book – biography by definition cannot be a full understanding of someone else's life.

"A life is unimaginable by anyone other than the person living the life," Gevisser said.

Adding to the challenge is that his high-profile protagonist has repeatedly defined himself as part of a collective, moved by considerations ideological rather than personal.

And one of the themes that emerges in the book is how Mbeki – echoing the cool, detached intellectual approach of his famous father, communist stalwart Govan Mbeki – repeatedly transmutes emotion into political principle.

This isn't the stuff of flesh and blood that ordinary people can relate to.

And still less understandable is Mbeki's lack of personal engagement in the attempt to find out what happened to his missing, presumed dead, son and the family's reticence in naming the person, previously a senior government figure in Lesotho, responsible for the death of Mbeki's brother Jama.

Nevertheless, the tale of Mbeki's life is rather like a good novel – beginning on the road to Mbewuleni, his birthplace, and tracing the ups and downs and reversals of fortune of not just Mbeki, but the ANC, its leaders and the country itself.

From the hills of Lesotho and the Eastern Cape to the president's official residence, Gevisser delineates a thread of destiny and mission that stretches from Mbeki's grandparents to his communist parents and finally to Thabo Mbeki himself.

Gevisser commented that Mbeki was, in many ways, a "third generation missionary" – his grandparents were Christian, his parents communist while the president himself sought the redemption of his people and had a quest for "self-determination", both individual and collective.

Gevisser said that while Mbeki had often been described as a pragmatist, at the end of the day, the president was an idealist.

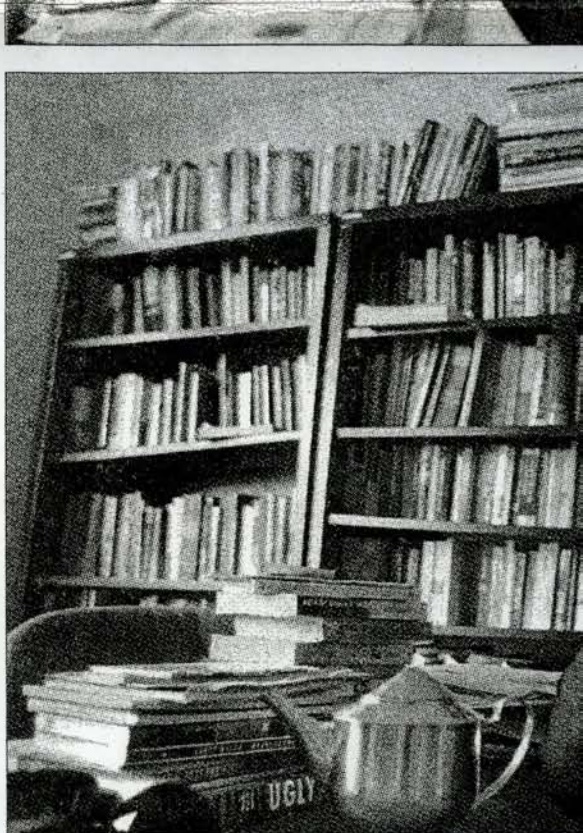
In the book, Gevisser points out how Mbeki has, through the years, often been something of a prophet in the wilderness – pushing for a political rather than military solution, winning Western support for the ANC in the face of his comrades' suspicions and later driving the ANC towards understanding market forces.

His account of the president's childhood depicts an upbringing strangely dysfunctional and "disconnected" – a word Mbeki himself used to the author. From a young age he grew up with an absentee father, who for most of his childhood and youth was away from home.

As a young man, Mbeki was groomed for leadership – sent abroad to study at Sussex University in the UK and later Moscow, and taken under the wing of Oliver Tambo, whose wife Adelaide regarded him as her other son.

From the world of carefree students in the swinging 1960s to Mbeki's eminently suitable marriage to Zanele Dlamini in a castle and to the "zen security garden" (a dust yard with patterns scratched each evening and checked for disturbance each morning) surrounding the couple's home in the suburbs of Lusaka, the story of Thabo Mbeki's life embraces widely variant locations.

Later, as the country entered the negotiations phase, Mbeki would be living in still more disparate



Author Mark Gevisser (above) has dedicated the p  
Mbeki: *The Dream Deferred*, published this week.

settings – as he whirled between covert encounters and high-public profile meetings wooing over big business, Afrikaners and the West; battling opponents within his own movement; and winning allies for his election as Nelson Mandela's deputy president.

Along the way Mbeki earned many epithets: he was dubbed "The Duke" by some comrades in Lusaka; compared to a weasel for being elusive, agile, supple and quick; and termed the ANC's crown prince by others.

One identity that Gevisser explores is Mbeki as a political seducer pointing out how repeatedly the president won over possible antagonists and suggesting that much of the vitriol against him was born out of the inevitable sense of being let down by those who fell for his charms, only to feel abandoned the next morning, so to speak.

Like any dramatic tale, Gevisser's book tracks the ups and owns and reversals of Mbeki's life, but given that this is not fiction but history in the making, there is no sense of closure to the tale.

That's because, as the book was being written and rewritten, the tumultuous events of the past few years were playing out in public life – notably the dismissal of deputy president and former Mbeki ally Jacob Zuma, and the bitter succession battle that is still raging within the ANC.

Gevisser said he was continuously having to go back and revisit his words in the "heat and light" of current affairs, and with the Mbeki years not yet over, he fully expects adding to a second edition.

He suggests that one reason so much bitterness has been directed at Mbeki was that when he became president, Mbeki was regarded by many as the "custodian of dreams".

So current is Gevisser's subject matter that his revelation that Mbeki knew beforehand that former National Prosecuting Authority boss Bulelani Ngcuka would state there was *prima facie* evidence of corruption on the part of Zuma occasioned

a spate of heated statements from Zuma supporters this week.

In the interview, Gevisser said some within Mbeki's inner circle had told him that the president had never been particularly close to Zuma, and the two ANC leaders' working relationship had been a product of circumstance more than anything else.

Gevisser, however, thinks the two men once enjoyed a far closer relationship, and said their rivalry was akin to a fallout between brothers. They were once regarded as the head and heart of leadership.

Gevisser said this could be seen in a broader context – in exile, ANC comrades had a “very intense fraternal relationship”, but often things got messed up after they came home. Once exiles had returned and society normalised, paths and ambitions inevitably diverged.

In the book, Gevisser traces tensions between Mbeki and Zuma back to before Zuma became deputy president and suggests that Mbeki and his circle had become disillusioned with Zuma but

pushed for him to become deputy president to keep Winnie Madikizela-Mandela out of the running. But plans for Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi to become the country's deputy president were scuppered and Zuma took that post.

Zuma's critics in Mbeki's circle, however, were concerned that he was overly ambitious and had poor judgment, Gevisser writes.

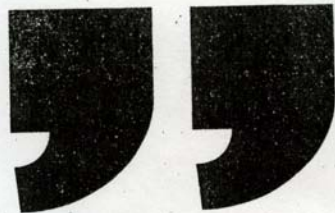
Then came the fallout over claims of corruption in the country's multibillion-rand arms deal.

Gevisser said that if the arms deal has turned out to be the poisoned well, then Mbeki himself initially – whatever his intentions – contaminated the water.

Mbeki's fraught relationship with Zuma is not the only tension between ANC leaders that Gevisser traces. He takes in too the divergent paths and styles chosen by Mbeki and slain SACP hero Chris Hani, and longstanding tensions with SACP leader Joe Slovo as well as with left-wing intellectual Pallo Jordan.

Intriguingly, Gevisser's book says Slovo always believed that an occasion when he had to call Mbeki

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to order while Mbeki was studying in Moscow was the root of the antipathy the president felt towards him. Gevisser said he knew what this had involved but was not at liberty to reveal the details.

The author said bigger issues than just a personal clash were at play.

Mbeki and his inner circle saw the SACP – the ANC ally that is now one of the president's loudest critics – in the light of a mere adjunct on the lines of the ANC's youth and women's structures.

Their vision of the SACP remaining "the party of Moses Kotane" had been shaken by the emergence of leaders such as Blade Nzimande, the former MP who was blocked from becoming a deputy minister and turned down an ambassadorial post to work for the SACP full-time.

Given the bitter tensions within the ANC in the run-up to its national conference in Polokwane next month, and the sharp clash of views over whether Mbeki should be elected to run the organisation again, it seems ironic that one of the reasons senior statesmen had once favoured Mbeki to succeed Mandela was that they thought he was best placed to continue unifying the ANC in the tradition of Tambo.

But Gevisser questions whether anyone could have been such a unifier in the face of the pressures and ideological differences that exist in the ANC and the country.

On one of the greatest controversies of Mbeki's years in government – the president's attitude to HIV/Aids – Gevisser depicts Mbeki as remaining a sceptic who still yearns to debate the cause and treatment of the epidemic.

He admits that the president's views are wide open to be called bizarre.

Yet Gevisser writes that these – along with the notion of an African Renaissance, determinedly confronting racism, quiet diplomacy on Zimbabwe – are all part, for Mbeki, of a homecoming – a reconnection with his African identity.

