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Death of An Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett

Beverley Naidoo

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Death of an Idealist is the biography of Neil Aggett, the only white person to die while being held in custody by South Africa's apartheid security police. A medical doctor who worked most of the week as an unpaid trade union organiser, Aggett's stark non-materialism, shared by his partner Dr Elizabeth Floyd, aroused suspicions. When their names appeared on a list of 'Close Comrades' prepared for opposition leaders in exile they were among a swathe of union activists detained in 1981. After 70 days in detention Aggett was found hanging from the bars of the steel grille in his cell in John Vorster Square. He was the 51st person, and the first white person, to die in detention. He was 28. His death provoked an enormous public outcry, his funeral attended by thousands of workers who marched through the streets of Johannesburg. This quiet, intense young man was, in death, a 'people's hero'.Born to settler parents in Kenya in 1953, Neil Aggett moved with his family to South Africa in early childhood. He attended school in Grahamstown before studying medicine at the University of Cape Town. Death of an Idealist explores the metamorphosis of a high-achieving, sports-loving schoolboy into a dedicated activist and unpaid trade union organiser. Beverley Naidoo traces Neil Aggett's life, in particular the years leading up to his detention as a result of a Security Branch 'sting' operation, the weeks of interrogation, and the inquest that followed his death. She recreates the momentous events of his life and, in doing so, reveals the extraordinary impact Neil's life had on those around him including his family, friends and comrades. Today, a generation later, South Africa is free and democratic. Yet the idealism and sacrifice displayed by Neil Aggett and so many others appears to have been replaced by cynicism and hand-wringing. Death of an Idealist is as much the story of a remarkable young man as it is a reminder that every generation needs its idealists.

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