



Starring Mandela and Cosby: Media and the End(s) of Apartheid

Ron Krabill

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During the worst years of apartheid, the most popular show on television in South Africa—among both Black and White South Africans—was *The Cosby Show*. Why did people living under a system built on the idea that Black people were inferior and threatening flock to a show that portrayed African Americans as comfortably mainstream? *Starring Mandela and Cosby* takes up this paradox, revealing the surprising impact of television on racial politics.

The South African government maintained a ban on television until 1976, and according to Ron Krabill, they were right to be wary of its potential power. The medium, he contends, created a shared space for communication in a deeply divided nation that seemed destined for civil war along racial lines. At a time when it was illegal to publish images of Nelson Mandela, Bill Cosby became the most recognizable Black man in the country, and, Krabill argues, his presence in the living rooms of white South Africans helped lay the groundwork for Mandela’s release and ascension to power.

Weaving together South Africa’s political history and a social history of television, Krabill challenges conventional understandings of globalization, offering up new insights into the relationship between politics and the media.



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