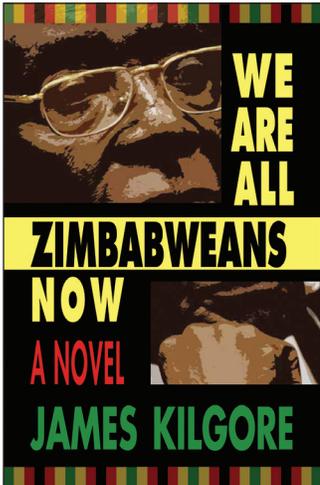




with James Kilgore, author of  
**WE ARE ALL ZIMBABWEANS NOW**  
Debut fiction from Ohio University Press (Oct. 2011)



**You wrote this book while you were incarcerated in California. It seems like a strange place from which to write about Zimbabwe. Why did you choose this story?**

I had lived 20 years in southern Africa before my arrest in 2002, including most of the 80s in Zimbabwe. On a personal level, writing about my years there was a way

of staying connected to my loved ones and friends in southern Africa. I wanted to avoid worrying about the petty struggles to survive in prison and hold onto the memories of all the wonder and tragedy of Zimbabwe and South Africa. But also, there was a political side to my motivation. At that time, Mugabe's government was seizing white-owned farms en masse. He claimed he was liberating the land for the African poor; meanwhile the whites alleged they were innocent victims who had tried their utmost to reconcile with Mugabe only to be rebuffed. I knew both sides were re-writing history to paint themselves in a favorable light. I wanted to contest those versions of history, to show that both the white farmers and Mugabe and his cohort were just manipulating the truth at the expense of the majority of Zimbabweans.

**Why did you choose a white American student as your lead character?**

This was my first novel so as a white male myself I felt more comfortable writing through a character with a background like mine. I wasn't sure I could take on leaps of race and gender in an initial novel.

**So is Ben Dabney really James Kilgore in disguise?**

No, Ben Dabney is not me. Some of his experiences are similar to mine, but we differ in important ways. For instance, I never went to Matabeleland during the military invasion in the mid 1980s. Ben's confrontation with the army there is central to the plot. I also never had the local security people chasing after me (at least not to my knowledge). And I never had a relationship with a disabled ex-freedom fighter. Still, some of the things Ben went through I also experienced—studying the Shona language, learning to eat sadza with my hands, remembering to say “good morning” to people and ask after their family before talking about the business of the day. Like Ben, I had never lived outside the U.S. before I went to Zimbabwe. I had a lot to learn.

**What do you actually think of Robert Mugabe?**

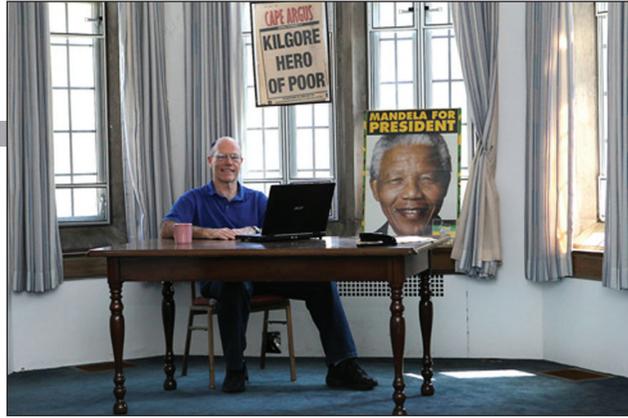
I supported Mugabe in his early years in power. During that time Zimbabwe made some great achievements in education, health care and rural development. Still, I never worshipped Mugabe like Ben Dabney. Of course by now Mugabe's become a caricature of the freedom fighter he once was. He showed his potential to go in this direction in the 1980s. Even while his government was building schools and clinics they were sending troops into Matabeleland. They ended up killing some 20,000 innocent civilians in the war against so-called dissidents. Shamefully, most of us who lived in Harare at the time, even those of us who had pretenses of being revolutionaries, refused to believe this was really happening. We buried our heads in the sand because it was confusing, even downright depressing, to believe that a heroic guerrilla



leader could do such horrific things. So most of us just dismissed the accusations as exaggerations, distortions circulated by apartheid South Africa or agents of Rhodesia's last Prime Minister, the arch racist Ian Smith. We wanted politics to be a morality play with good and evil clearly cast. It's just not like that anywhere and definitely not in a newly independent African state.

### **What did you read that influenced the writing of *We Are All Zimbabweans Now*?**

My family and friends sent me some fabulous reading material while I was in prison. It was a great thrill every time the guard called out my name for mail and handed me a big fat parcel of books. Probably the most important influences were Zimbabwean writers, especially Shimmer Chinodya and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Plus Irene Staunton. I loved her *Mothers of the Revolution*. Surprisingly, *The DaVinci Code* was also helpful. Dan Brown gave me a lot of ideas on how to use debates about history to construct a political thriller. *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki was another big inspiration. I drew on the experience of her protagonist as a journalist to pose the moral dilemmas for Ben Dabney as a researcher. Then there was *The Catastrophist* by Ronan Bennett, a brilliant tale of expatriates in the Congo during the time of Lumumba. Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* was set in the same time period. *Poisonwood* is a great piece of writing but Bennett's style and content were far closer to my heart. Lastly, I should mention two writers who are not so well known but with whom I shared some political history: B. Traven and Victor Serge. I re-read their works to prepare for writing my own novel. Traven was a German anarchist who fled the authorities in 1919 and lived the rest of his life as a fugitive in Mexico. He wrote novels dealing with the history of the Mexican Revolution. Serge was a Russian revolutionary who wrote both fiction and political essays while in Stalinist prisons.



### **Who did you envision as the readers for this book?**

Students of history, African history in particular. It's rare to find a novel with a grad student researcher as the protagonist, even more unusual when that protag-

onist focuses on weighty issues of history, politics, race, and research methodology. So I hoped that would grab some students. I wanted them to get hooked on the tale but also realize that we have a lot to learn from people in the global South, even from those in small countries like Zimbabwe.

### **How has your book been used in the classroom?**

Several professors have used it as a text, mostly for courses dealing with Africa. It's been very successful. To some extent the appeal is accessibility. Students complain a lot about the density of academic texts, how boring journal articles are. One told me he could learn the same things from my novel and enjoy the reading at the same time. I also visited a creative writing class which read the book and talked to them about the process of writing while incarcerated. Students couldn't believe that I didn't have access to the Internet, that I actually wrote the final draft out by hand.

### **What's in the future for you as a writer?**

I have two more novels coming out this year. *Freedom Never Rests* is a story about peoples' struggles for access to water in post-apartheid South Africa. Then there is *Prudence Couldn't Swim*, a crime fiction piece involving the murder of a young Zimbabwean woman in California. I have a few more in the works—more crime fiction with South African heroines and some stories about prison in the U.S. Lots of work to be done. I just wish I had more time. I guess that's a funny thing for someone coming out of prison to say, but that's how I feel.

### **WE ARE ALL ZIMBABWEANS NOW**

By James Kilgore, to be published in October 2011  
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