

# BOOK EXCLUSIVE

## We Are All Zimbabweans Now

by James Kilgore

Interviewer: Helga Jansen  
Reviewer: Andre Marais

James Kilgore ▶

James Kilgore lived as a fugitive in the US, Zimbabwe, Australia and finally South Africa for 30 years, and was known to many as John Pape. He was implicated in the armed activities of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) in the 1970s in San Francisco. He managed to avoid detection for nearly three decades while in that time working for progressive

organisations both in Zimbabwe and South Africa. In an *Amandla!* exclusive, we interview James Kilgore and review his first novel, *We Are All Zimbabweans Now*. The novel comes out of his period of detention and his first writing under his real name.

**Amandla!:** How much of Ben Dabney, your protagonist in *We Are All Zimbabweans Now*, is autobiographical, and how much is a composite character of different experiences and people?



**James Kilgore:** Ben Dabney's broad profile is similar to my own. Like me he went to Zimbabwe from the US in the early 1980s. Like Ben I also had pro-ZANU and pro-Mugabe sympathies at the time (though I was never as starry-eyed about it all). However, that's about it. The particulars of his story are fictional, very different from my experience. I never went to Matabeleland during the repression there. I never undertook any research that brought me into conflict with authorities. I never had a relationship with an ex-freedom fighter. Nonetheless, I drew on things that happened to me and people I knew. There are scenes in the book I did experience indirectly. For example, there's a scene in the book in which Ben attends a prize-giving where Mugabe gives the keynote address. I taught at a school where Mugabe spoke at the prize-giving. I went to parties and braais with prestigious ZANU people like Ben did. But this is not my autobiography. Maybe that will come some day. This isn't it.

**A:** What made you decide to write a work of fiction, as opposed to a writing a political analyses of your time in Southern Africa.

**JK:** I love to write and obviously in prison, you have the time to do it. I chose fiction because I had little access to the resources I would have needed to write political analyses – books, the



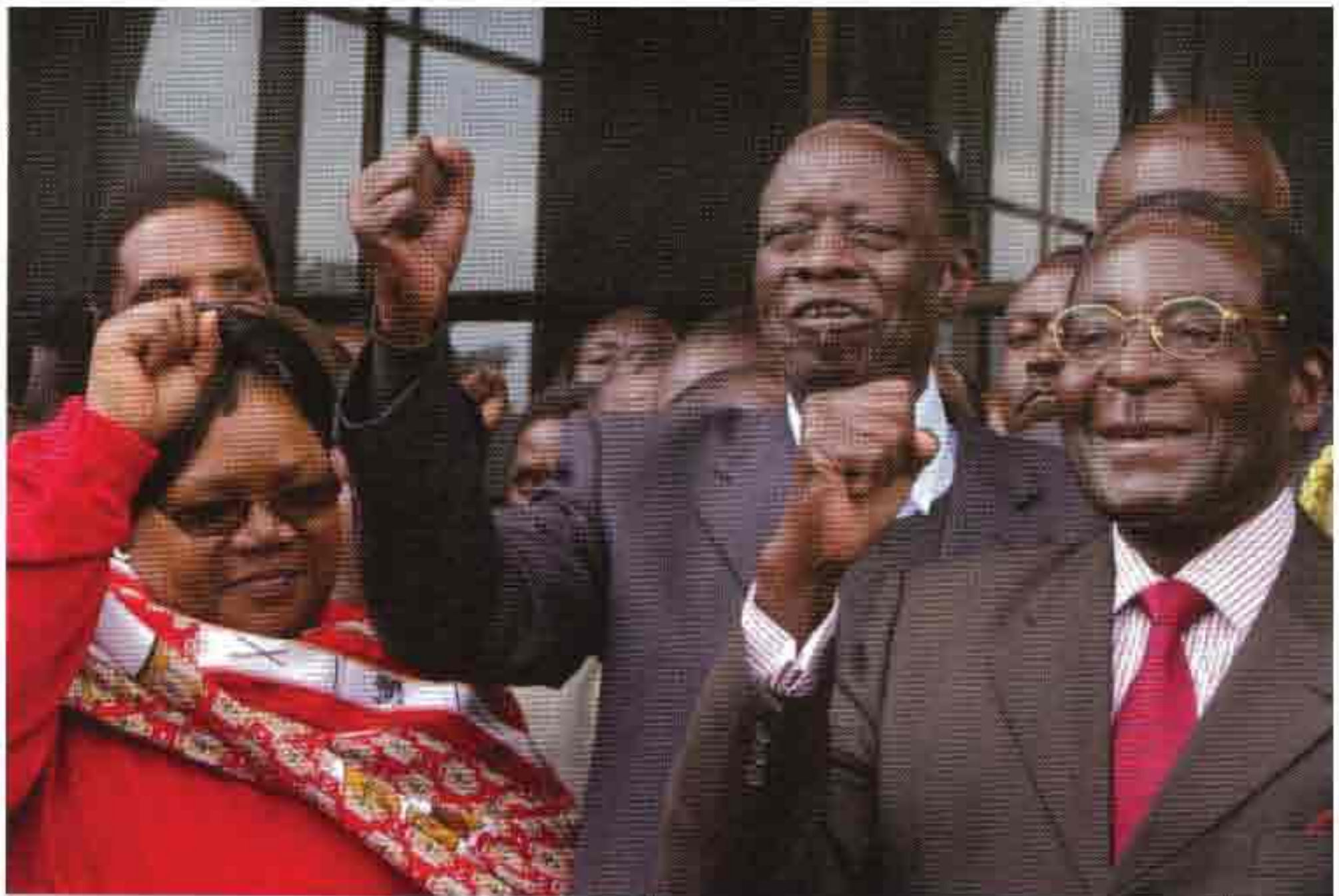
Internet, newspapers and most of all, the people who made the history in southern Africa. Fiction seemed more feasible. Of course, I didn't realise how hard it was. I did about ten drafts of this book before I got a final version. The first ones were really awful. Luckily I had some friends who read the early attempts and were honest enough to tell me they were rubbish.

**A!:** You lived in Zimbabwe soon after the Robert Mugabe government came to power. Was there anything in the Zimbabwe of the 1980s and 1990s which hinted at the turmoil that country is experiencing today.

**JK:** Few people could have envisioned that Zimbabwe would have plunged to its present level, though there were elements of today's disasters at that time – corruption, military repression, lack of democracy. Yet the outcome was not inevitable. There was hope and optimism in most of the country and genuine reform expanded education, the building of clinics and vast support for small farmers. Remember, at independence there wasn't a single government high school for blacks in the rural areas where 70% of the people lived. Within two years, there were hundreds. That was an amazing achievement. There others as well. While independence brought no revolution, most Zimbabweans believed the end result would be, as it were, a better life for all. Sadly, the forces of reform got swallowed up by the big fish of ZANU and big business, coupled with some disastrous influence from the global free market.

**A!:** The Zimbabwe you describe in your book slowly strips away the illusions of your naive protagonist. The genocide in Matabeleland, and the murder of Tichasara, together with thousands of others who "were disappeared" come together in a nations' silence and build a history of a leader and a party, casting them in the light of national liberators. Is the Zimbabwean experience a mirror for the ruling party in South Africa?

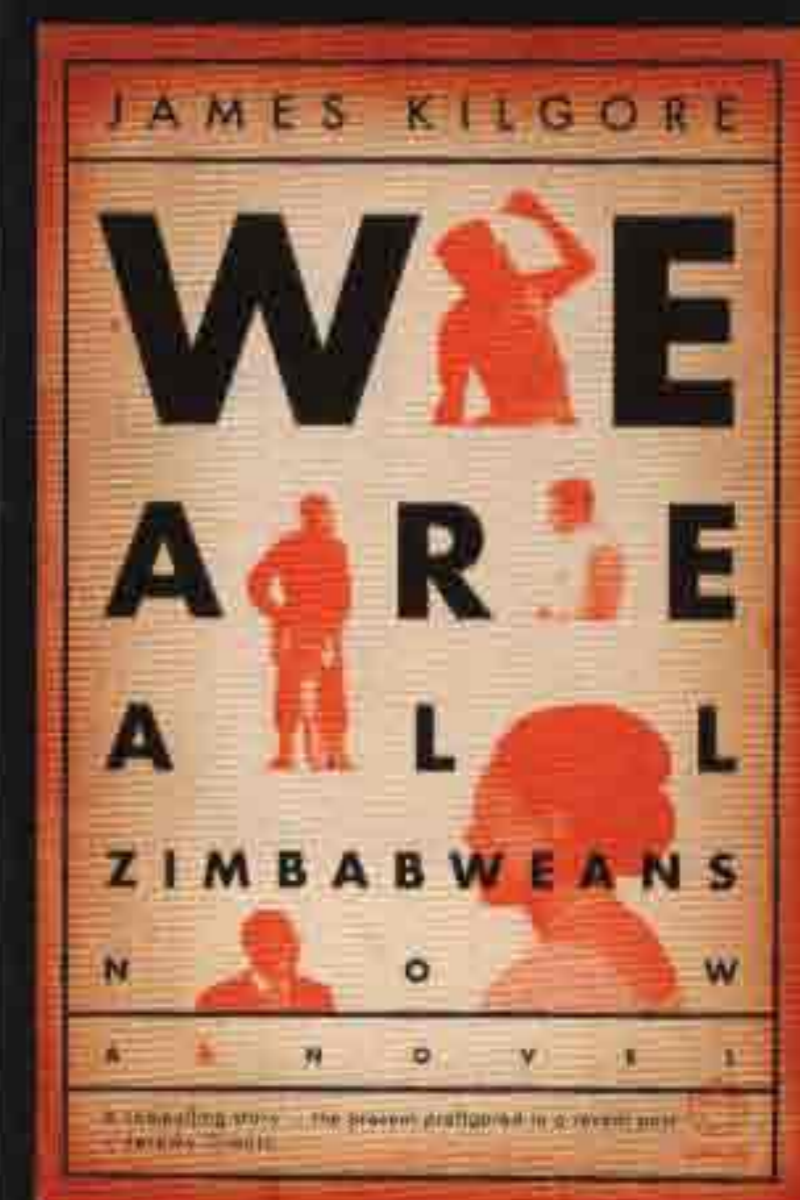
**JK:** There are no mirrors. Each country has its own history, its own particulars. Yet few people could look at Zimbabwe from South Africa today and not have at least a faint fear that things could also go horribly wrong south of the Limpopo. We see problems today in South Africa that have also been features of recent Zimbabwe, for example corruption and an intolerance and arrogance on the part of some elements of the ruling party and government. These are cause for concern. The fact that the problem of HIV/AIDS could have been swept under



the carpet in South Africa for so long is also a definite worry. My hope for South Africa lies in the incredible history of democratic organisation – unlike anywhere in Africa, certainly unlike Zimbabwe where social movements have little tradition of internal democracy or addressing macro political and economic issues. Zimbabwe's liberation was won on the battlefield, South Africa had an armed struggle but apartheid was ultimately overthrown on the picket line, in the street committees, by the rent boycotters and youth structures. It may take a reconstituting of all that to keep the country on track.

Lastly, there's one important point about Zimbabwe's history people tend to forget. The present crisis has its roots not in the reforms of the eighties but in the free market economic policy known as ESAP which the government initiated in 1990. Only after ESAP did the gap between rich and poor escalate. Only after ESAP were the poor no longer able to afford education or medical treatment. ESAP removed price controls on consumer goods and subsidies for small scale farmers as well. By the mid nineties, the World Bank was praising Mugabe but the workers, rural citizenry and Liberation War Veterans were rebelling. Mugabe's solution was raiding the national treasury to provide payouts to the Veterans. They became a paramilitary force against the opposition. From that point, the Zimbabwe government resorted to the politics of desperation to block attempts to organize an alternative to ZANU. Opposition activists were beaten and killed, elections were rigged.

A badly needed land redistribution was hijacked in favor of seizing farms and often giving them to political leaders instead of black farmers. The free market didn't exactly cause all this but the effects of ESAP forced Mugabe to resort to seemingly irrational measures just to stay in power. When you have extremes of wealth and poverty side by side, you can never have stability, let alone democracy. ●



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*We Are All Zimbabweans Now* deals with American student Ben Dabney's involvement in the post-independence period in Zimbabwe. At first blinded by the liberation euphoria, he is seduced by the new ruling elite and Mugabe's reconciliatory poses and utterings, one of which provides the novel with its title. He gradually realises his naivety as a chain of events sobers him to a web of deceit and he uncovers some harrowing contradictions, like the army's secret operations in Matabeleland. Kilgore weaves a rich and complex tapestry of plots, situations and characters that show all is not what it seems and demonstrate how "comrade" can mean different things to different people. It is a noble attempt to recreate, in fiction, a moment not unlike our present South Africa, where painful disillusionment can lead to cynicism or enlightenment.