

# *A Young Girl in a Forgotten War*

— AN ESSAY BY —

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**A** story doesn't mature for me until I uncover what's at its heart. In the early stages, I can sketch rough plot points and shape the still-soft bones of the characters. But the work seems dully clerical until I arrive at a crystalized nugget of emotion that gives fire and fuel to the novel.

That process took me a while in the production of *The Lost History of Stars*. I wrote two full versions in succession that were thick with research and drama but too lean on humanity. It wasn't until I trashed a couple years' work that I realized the story wasn't about the political mechanics of war. It was about a young country girl; it was about the forgotten victims of every war.

At that point, I surrendered the narration of the book to the character who could breathe life into it: an adolescent girl named Aletta Venter.

Aging from twelve to fourteen in the book, Aletta has the audacity to believe she can carve out bits of normalcy while imprisoned in a British concentration camp in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). She grows, adapts, and takes joy in her small daily insurgences. When facing a lack of paper for her journal, she steals every copy of the posted camp rules she can find. Because, as she reasons, among the many rules imposed by the Brits, none forbids the stealing of the rules.

When she befriends a more worldly city girl, Aletta begs her to decode the secret lives of boys. And Aletta overcomes her hatred for the British invaders when she meets a teenage British guard, as dispirited as any of the prisoners, who gives her the rare gift of a little positive attention.

To Aletta, imprisonment is a state of mind. She sneaks from her tent in the middle of the night to study the free-roaming stars, as she so often did at home with her grandfather. When confined to her small tent, she withdraws into her imagination to execute grand escapes. She may lie on a dirt

floor within guarded fences in the middle of the burned-out veld, but in her mind is the universe—a more welcoming place. So she wages her tiny war against the British Empire with her only weapons: hope and imagination.

It took several rewrites, but Aletta finally convinced me she could tell this story. She wanted to be a writer, so I gave her the chance. She made me wither at the thought of what terrible things humans can do to each other, and marvel at the steel some people still have inside when almost everything else has been pared away.

She became my hero.

ONE OF THE ORIGINAL impetuses for *The Lost History of Stars* was that my grandfather had been some manner of camp guard in the British Army during the Boer War. I realized after just a little bit of research that this war has been largely forgotten by most of the world, even though it was a blueprint for the warfare and cruelty to come later in the twentieth century.

With the Boer men and boys (ages eight to eighty) in commandos out on the veld, the British burned the Boer farms and forced the displaced women and children into hastily constructed concentration camps. In the face of terrible sanitation, overcrowding, and lack of food and medical services, twenty-seven thousand women and children died in the camps, a total nearly ten times greater than the number of deaths of soldiers in combat on both sides. It was, truly, a war against children.

Online, I discovered a photo of a terribly sick young girl in a camp, Lizzie van Zyl, who was reduced to slack skin over bones by typhoid fever. Her face shows a beauty that would never blossom, her cheekbones high and wide and her lips pulled back to suggest an attempted smile. It was her eyes that most haunted me. They are pale and curious and seem to be asking: “Why?”

While I didn’t create Aletta as an embodiment of Lizzie—among other differences, Aletta is older and much healthier—I wanted Aletta to carry Lizzie’s spirit. But how to get inside Aletta’s head? I asked dozens of women to recall their thoughts at age fourteen, a survey that produced two leading results: boys, and concerns over their own shaky self-image.

After consulting psychiatrists for insight into ways an adolescent mind would cope with such stress at a critical period of development, I was led to two books born of the Holocaust: Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for*

*Meaning* and Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life*. Frankl was an Austrian psychologist who survived, and Hillesum was a young woman who did not. Both draw the conclusion that an active mind, inner strength, and a singular reason for living are the critical factors.

And, of course, as I shaped Aletta Venter—within the first institutionalized concentration camps, four decades before the Nazi experiment in inhumanity—I thought often of Anne Frank. Aletta shares Anne's determination to be optimistic in the most difficult circumstances, and I think of them as sisters displaced in time.

Through Aletta's eyes, and through my research, I saw more clearly two of the great fallacies of war: One is the common notion that soldiers monopolize the pain and death. It's just that there are no medals or parades for the innocents who die in every war. The other is that anybody ever learns anything from a war other than new ways to conduct later wars. The British imperialist aggression in South Africa was spurred by the discovery of gold and diamonds. One hundred years later, it was oil that made the Middle East a target for misguided nation-building. The power vacuum created in South Africa after the Brits pulled out was at the root of the distrust, suspicion, and hatred that led to the disastrous apartheid system.

All those things, the geopolitical power plays, the hunger for resources, the movement of armies like lethal chess pieces, are covered by history books. Over time, that's left too few opportunities to celebrate the small, hard-won individual victories of brave characters like Aletta Venter. *The Lost History of Stars* is her story, the kind that repeats in times of conflict but too often is forgotten.