



Between The Lines

# Overwhelming transformation

ONE of BTL's most memorable experiences was a trip to South Africa in 1992. Apartheid had been dismantled, Nelson Mandela was free and there was a palpable sense of hope and potential.

Six years earlier, ostensibly to avoid military service and a soaring crime rate, David Smiedt left South Africa and landed in Australia. When he returned recently, it was to discover a country the transformation of which was often overwhelming.

*Are We There Yet?* (University of Queensland Press, \$22.95) is the result of what Smiedt says was his attempt to chase his childhood through South Africa. It is a splendid book, one that seeks and finds the heart of a beautiful, bewildering country.

Smiedt travelled 8000km in three months, venturing from Soweto to Cape Town, Kruger Park to Kimberley, and pulls no punches about what he found.

He is as glowing in his praise

of South Africa's virtues as he is damning of its shortcomings.

His renewed education began from his first day when he was robbed in Johannesburg, a city in which some residents have cars equipped with flame-throwers and houses armed with electrified razor wire for extra security.

Apparently, these days there is more chance of being murdered in Johannesburg than any other city in the world. When BTL was there, the city was gripped by so-called 'taxi wars' in which drivers from rival cab companies would steal each other's passengers at gunpoint.

"South Africa is a place of crime and violence," says Smiedt.

"Its history has its fair share of spilled blood.

"Then again, it is also a place of remarkable people. Just consider the fact the transition to majority rule after apartheid was mostly bloodless.

"there are problems and some might seem insurmountable.

"But it is very much early days for the new South Africa and it will take time, perhaps generations, for the country to really find its feet."

*Are We There Yet?* examines serious issues and asks serious questions, yet it is filled with humour and wonder as Smiedt dodges elephants, shares a panoramic view with baboons, joins 25,000 tourists to visit the clearly misnamed Lost City, eats gristled goat and meets the rain queen of the sacred kingdom of Tzaneen.

More anecdotal than analytical, and all the better for that approach, *Are We There Yet?* is also an account of Smiedt's efforts to learn the story of his father, a man he hardly remembers.

This is the best kind of travel book because, unlike some which offer merely a collection of impersonal, if functional descriptions, *Are We There Yet?* brings a country to life courtesy of the author's intimate personal connection.



David Smiedt found a new South Africa when he returned recently