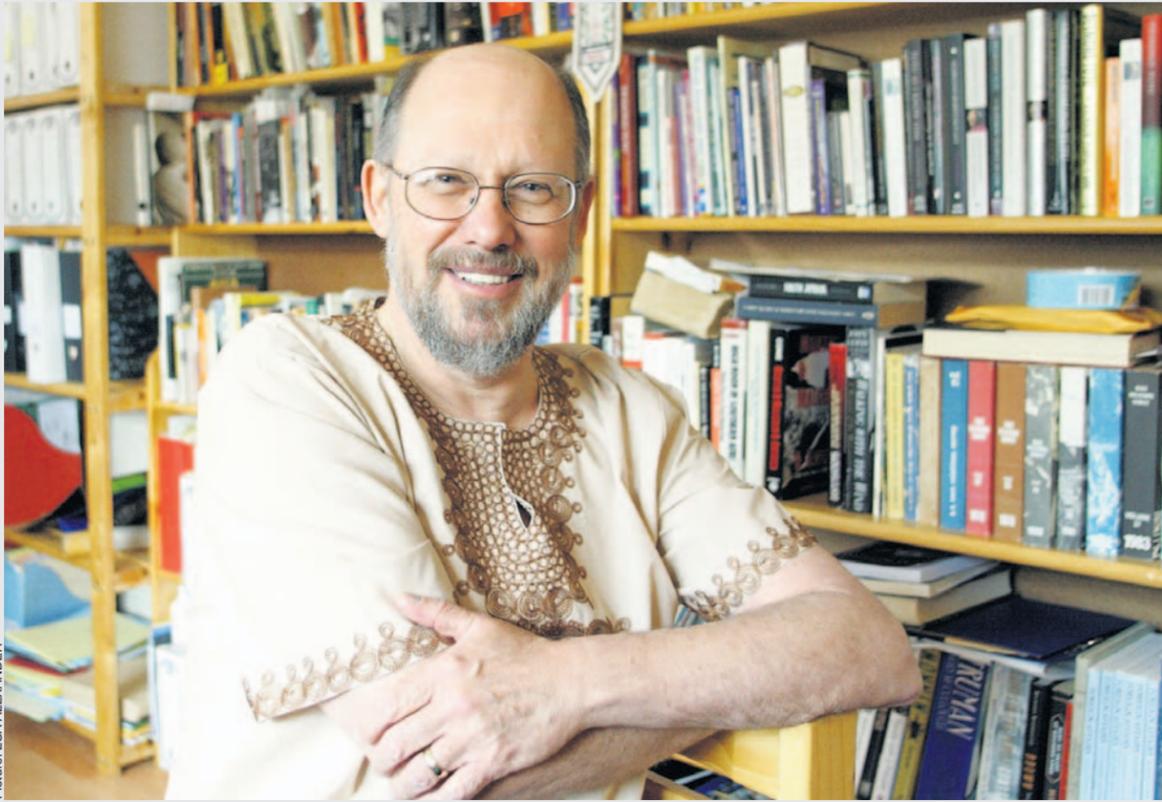


# Inside the life of a reluctant icon

John Allen has lived and worked closely with Desmond Tutu since he became his press secretary in 1987. Over the years the two developed a strong bond of trust and the result is Allen's *Rabble-Rouser for Peace* — an intimate, revealing and well-written portrait of a global figure



Picture: ESA ALEXANDER



## JOHN ALLEN

First working as a journalist in South Africa and then as Desmond Tutu's press secretary, John Allen was invited to join the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as director of communications in 1995. Next he was aide to Tutu when the archbishop taught in Atlanta for two years. Thus he has had a unique opportunity to observe his subject first hand and has complete access to the archbishop's personal and public files. *Rabble-Rouser for Peace* is the first book to tell the story of how Tutu, a boy from SA's poverty-stricken black townships, became one of the world's best-known religious figures and a moral icon for those who work for peace and justice everywhere. Published to coincide with Tutu's 75th birthday, it contains never-before-seen material, including details of apartheid government secret files, how the Nobel Prize was actually won by Tutu, the truth about his relationship with FW de Klerk, as well as his criticism of the archbishop of Canterbury. Drawn from 30 years of Allen's first-hand contact with Tutu, this is not only a vivid character study of a public figure with a unique capacity to communicate warmth, humour and compassion; it's a rich account of his dynamic place in history. John Allen lives in Cape Town.

**Q&A** **What motivated you to write this book?** I first thought Desmond Tutu was worth a biography in 1980. I had been reporting on him for a couple of years and he seemed on the way to becoming one of the country's greatest church leaders. I thought I might write something once I had retired. But a few years ago, when I was living in New York and trying to work out how best to return, a literary agent told me if I wanted to get an advance from a publisher, I had better do it quickly before my subject fell into obscurity. So money and the desire to get home had a lot to do with the timing.

**How long did it take to complete?** The final research and writing process took a little under two years.

**How demanding was the writing process?** The research and interviews were fun — I was building my picture of him, I travelled a lot and I found the archival material fascinating. But the writing was excruciating at times. I was trying to collate a lot of research, and I'm a bit pedantic about sourcing and nuance, so it was very slow — especially the first half of the book.

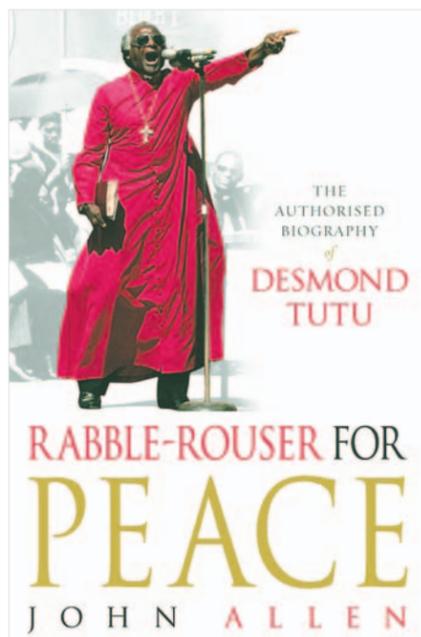
**What was the most challenging part of the process?** Having worked for my subject for so long, I'm susceptible to the charge that I have been too close to him to write a rounded biography. I had to work hard to find material critical of him and his actions. Finding people prepared to criticise him wasn't easy and I had to search the archives very thoroughly.

**The criteria for the Alan Paton Award say the book must 'illuminate truthfulness, especially those forms that are new, delicate, unfashionable and fly in the face of power'. How does your book do this?** It depends on what you call unfashionable. Is it unfashionable to suggest that the ANC spectacularly shot itself in the foot in its response to the Truth Commission? I don't know. I'm not sure I'm the right person to ask. I'm too close to the book.

**How did your perception of Tutu change from when you first began writing and researching the book to the end piece?** He's pretty much an open book, but what was intriguing was to trace the roots of his activism and his faith, how his mother and father formed him in ways directly relevant to the choices he made later; the way in which apartheid's forced removals impacted on his family. So I developed a much better understanding of why he became who he is.

**Was there anything you discovered about him that particularly surprised or inspired you?** I was intrigued to find, buried away in the basement of a library in Geneva, a stack of spiral wire-bound reporter's notebooks reflecting his daily reflections on three years of travelling through Africa, a decade into liberation, in the early '70s. He made 40 visits to 25 countries; Nigeria after the Biafran War, Mobutu's Zaire, Amin's Uganda, Burundi after massacres, Smith's Rhodesia, and Mozambique under the Portuguese. I had no idea of the richness of his experience and its influence on him. I'm not sure that even he fully realised how important it was. On a visit to Rwanda a year after the 1994 genocide, he quite unconsciously repeated phrases about Hutu-Tutsi conflict which he had used 22 years earlier in a trip report.

**Publicly presenting a man who is such an icon is a huge responsibility. How difficult was it to present a fair and honest reflection of who Tutu is as a man?** It wasn't too difficult. He may not like what people sometimes write about him, and he doesn't hesitate to hit back — some-



times in an embarrassingly hurt, wounded kind of tone — but he's actually a libertarian with an innate respect for the integrity and professionalism of others.

**How has democracy changed writing in South Africa?** It's loosened us up, freed us to write without having, in everything we do, at least implicitly, to declare where we stand on the fundamental question which used to underlie everything in our society — apartheid and your attitude to it.

**Where, when and how do you write?** In a garage which I've turned into a study, ideally between 6am and lunchtime on weekdays, on a very old Dell desktop, and painfully slowly.

**What lessons have you learnt from writing this book?** That archives are an extraordinarily rich source and that at some stage you have to let the narrative take over.

**What impact would you like your book to have on others?** To present my subject as a person who has ordinary foibles and weaknesses as well as great qualities.

**Which writers do you most admire?** I don't read a lot of fiction but I love what Zakes Mda is doing.

**How has writing this book affected you?** I was trained as a journalist for an afternoon daily, so I've never spent more than a few days on a single piece. I've also spent my life writing in clichéd journalese. I was terrified that I would fall flat on my face trying to write a book to an 18-month deadline. That I didn't has given me a confidence I didn't have before.

**What do you think of the state of non-fiction writing in South Africa?** Before liberation, it was impossible to visualise what we would find to write about after apartheid — other than the predictable, such as biographies of Tutu. When you see the proliferation of new books on the tables and shelves of Clarke's in Cape Town, you realise we needn't have worried.

**If you were left on a deserted island, which book would you want with you?** Maybe Robert Caro's massive biography of Lyndon Johnson. But I'm intrigued with the late 19th century interaction between black and white people in Southern Africa, and it would be nice to slow down and get into *Words of Batswana*, an anthology of letters to the newspaper *Mahoko a Betswana* between 1883 and 1896.

**How would you describe the smell of an old book?** If it's not been read for ages, musty and unattractive. — *Oliver Roberts*

## GIVEAWAY



**SUSPENSE: Uber cool teen icon Alex Rider saves the world again**

**T**HE NAME'S RIDER, ALEX RIDER. If you're a fan, join Anthony Horowitz, creator of the teen spy series, at the Sunday Times stand at The Cape Town Book Fair on **Saturday June 16 at 3pm**, where he will be interrogated by Tom Eaton.

This information, received via high security link from Alex Rider's office at MI6 HQ in London, will delight fans of the 14-year-old uber cool super spy who, somewhat reluctantly, continues to save the world from disaster. Rider has all the prerequisites of a great spy — a mysterious past, good looks and great dress sense.

Horowitz himself has a background worthy of a series of books, though his is rather more Dickensian. He was born into a wealthy family but his father, threatened with bankruptcy, transferred all his money from his Swiss bank accounts to another under a false name. He died shortly after and the money was never found. Unhappy and overweight, Horowitz spent several traumatic years at school and used writing as a means of revenge on those who taunted him.

For more on the Cape Town Book Fair go to [www.capetownbookfair.com](http://www.capetownbookfair.com)

To win copies of two of Anthony Horowitz's books, *Stormbreaker* and *South by South East*, tell us in under 100 words what you like about Alex Rider. Put your answer on a postcard addressed to: Alex Rider Giveaway, Sunday Times Lifestyle, PO Box 1742, Saxonwold, 2132. Closing date is June 4.

