

## The film “Red Dust”

This 2004 film [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red\\_Dust\\_\(2004\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Dust_(2004_film)), starring Hilary Swank, is set in the rural, post-apartheid Smitsrivier (a real river, but a fictional town in the Western Cape) sometime during the late 1990s and the waning days of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth\\_and\\_Reconciliation\\_Commission\\_\(South\\_Africa\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_(South_Africa)). The story is based on the book of the same name (2000) by South African novelist and playwright Gillian Slovo. The story focuses on the conflicts and the Apartheid legacy shared by all South Africans. The stage is set with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) coming to Smitsrivier to hear an amnesty case involving local, retired police officer, Dirk Hendricks (played by Jamie Bartlett). Retired lawyer and anti-apartheid activist Ben Hoffman (played by Marius Weyers, whom you saw in *Bopha!* and *Power of One*) is asked by friend James Sizela to use this TRC meeting to find out what happened to son Steve, who has been missing since the mid-1980's and presumed dead. Ben recruits former student Sarah Barcant (played by Hilary Swank), but now living and working as a prosecutor in New York, to represent the case. Steve Sizela was last seen being held in jail by Dirk Hendricks and former Police Chief Piet Muller (played by Ian Roberts). The belief is that Muller tortured and killed Steve, then disposed of the body. The local Member of Parliament, Alex Mpondo (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) is asked to testify in the case as a torture victim himself and a comrade of Steve's. Ben and Sarah believe that by questioning Mpondo, Muller, and Hendrick during the amnesty hearings that truth can be found and those guilty can be prosecuted. But truth proves to be elusive; old wounds are opened and new ones are created. This was the dilemma of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – did it allow all South Africans to reconcile a violent past and move on to a promising future, or did it simply stir up old, violent conflicts and allow them to fester without satisfactory resolution?

The author of *Red Dust*, Gillian Slovo, comes from a particularly intriguing South African Family. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe\\_Slovo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Slovo) Her parents were radical political activists in South Africa in the 1940s-60s and important members in the anti-apartheid movement. Her father and mother, Joe Slovo and Ruth First, were members of the South African Communist Party (Joe eventually became General Secretary of the SACP) and both worked closely with the ANC. The family was forced into exile in the 1960s. Ruth was killed in 1982 by a letter bomb mailed to her in exile in Mozambique where she was Director of Research at Universidade Mondlane. Her biography (and the family's biography in general) is told in the 1988 film *A World Apart*, starring Barbara Hershey. The screenplay was written by Ruth's daughter (and Gillian's sister) Shawn Slovo. Joe eventually returned to South Africa in 1990 and helped negotiate the end of Apartheid and the transition to the new government. He became Minister of Housing in the Mandela government but died of cancer in 1995. He is featured in the 2006 film *Catch a Fire*; Shawn Slovo also wrote the screenplay. Both Ruth and Joe Slovo are the only whites buried in the Avalon Cemetery in Soweto. In 1997 Gillian Slovo wrote her memoir, *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country*, an account of her childhood in South Africa and her relationship with her parents.

The Slovos are only one of several well-known, white South African families that were literary, politically active leftists, and significant anti-apartheid forces during the South African struggle. Others include Breyten Breytenbach [Afrikaner] (*True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*), Antjie Krog [Afrikaner] (*Country of my Skull*), Donald Woods [English] (*Biko*), Nadine Gordimer [English] (*July's People* and Nobel Prize winner), Andre Brink [Afrikaner] (*A Dry White Season*), Athol Fugard [mixed parentage] (playwright: *Boesman and Lena*; *Tsotsi*), J M Coetzee [mixed parentage], and many others. Check out some of these authors on Wikipedia. Of course there were many Black and so-called Coloured families that had similar interests and backgrounds, without whose critical sacrifices the new South Africa could not have emerged so successfully.