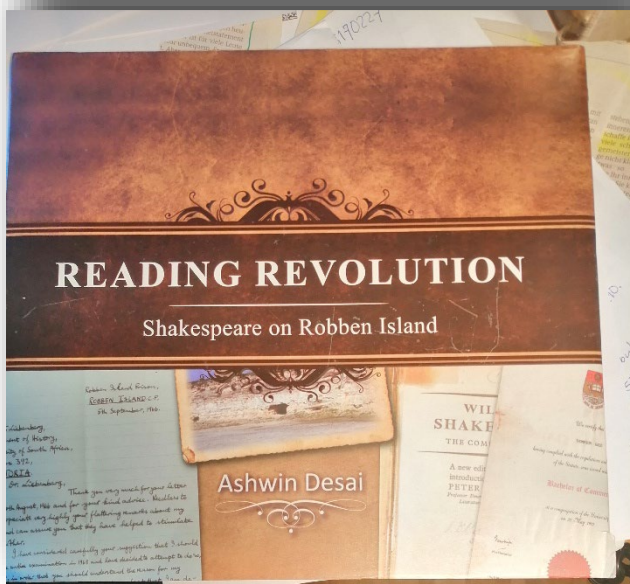




Professor Ashwin Desai is Director of the Centren for Sociological Research at the University of Johannesburg. Among his books are *We are the Poors: community Struggles in Post-apartheid South Africa*, and an edited collection, *The Race to Transform: Sport in Post-apartheid South Africa*.

The prison-authorities on Robben Island displayed a remarkable obsession with censoring the news that prisoners could receive of the outside world. Yet, as the pages of this book reveal, political prisoners managed to escape these constraints through literature, travelling to the sites of contemporary revolutionary struggles and to the frontlines of the French and Bolschevik revolutions. Tolstoy jostled with Trotsky, while Shakespeare 'winged' his was over the walls of the single and communal cells. As the prisoners brought their experiences to bear on the text, the works of Shakespeare were mined for their anti-colonial and anti-apartheid inspirations as much as for the power and beauty of their words. The texts also left their mark on the consciousness and memories of liberation-fighters, with many prisoners reciting lines from Shakespeare's plays and sonnets some three decades after their release.

Through the memories and biographical accounts written by former political inmates, the book evocatively brings to life the voices of prisoners who furtively copied books at night before they were snatched back by the warders. This book is about those books, about how words can inspire the human spirit, light up the intellect and free the reader to travel the world. But this is not a book simply about the past. By opening the all too quickly forgotten pages of history, the book seeks to ignite once more a reading revolution, to stir up the Imagination, in a South Africa whose democratic transition seeks to consolidate power from above while being increasingly contested by insurgent protest from below.

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