Bedtime Biography: Long Walk to Freedom

The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela

By Nelson Mandela

10-minute read

Synopsis

Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) is one of the most famous autobiographies of recent times. It tells the story of his life, from his humble beginnings in the South African countryside to his work as an iconic anti-apartheid freedom fighter, and ends, after chronicling his twenty-year prison sentence, with his final victory and release.

Who is it for?

- People interested in Nelson Mandela
- Anyone curious about South African history
- Proponents of social justice

About the author

Nelson Mandela is among the most eminent political figures of the twentieth century. He was the icon of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, devoting his entire life to the cause. For his commitment to justice, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

Introduction

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Are you willing to give up everything to fight injustice – are you willing to give up your freedom, your family, your future? Nelson Mandela would face this question time and time again. And throughout the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, his answer was always "yes." He dedicated his life to fighting apartheid and endured decades of public persecution, living underground, *and* thirty long years of imprisonment.

When he walked out of prison on February 11, 1990, the world watched in awe as the system he'd fought all his life started to crumble. Though apartheid wasn't broken by his efforts alone, his imprisonment had come to symbolize the injustice of this regime – and it didn't survive long once he was free. In 1991, the legal structures that supported apartheid were repealed, and 3-years later the country held it's first free elections. All South Africans, both Black and white, were finally allowed to vote. In that same year, at the age of seventy-five, Nelson Mandela became president of a new, hopeful, and free nation.

Where did he find the strength to fight for as long and as hard as he did? What drove the twentieth century's most famous freedom fighter? In this Bedtime Biography, we'll take a reflective journey through his long walk to freedom.

Chapter 1

Situated in the Eastern Cape, the Transkei is a beautiful region in South Africa with rolling hills and picturesque valleys. Nestled within this landscape is the village of Mvezo. This is where, in 1918, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born – this is the place he'd always call home. At birth, Mandela was given the name Rolihlahla, which means "troublemaker" – His parents had no idea how fitting the name would be. But it wasn't until he was seven, on his first day at a local Christian school, that Rolihlahla was given the name "Nelson." In South Africa's British missionary schools, it was standard practice to replace African names with British ones. Mandela never knew why his teacher chose the name Nelson, but it stuck.

The Transkei is home to the Xhosa nation. Within this nation, Mandela's family belong to the Thembu people, a large group who've resided in the area for centuries. Among them, the Mandela's were royalty. Nelson's father, Gadla, was both a local chief and a counsellor to the Thembu royal household. But, when Nelson was an infant, his father ran afoul of the British magistrate, who, as colonizers, had assumed the right to ratify local rulers. Gadla was proud and rebellious, and he refused to accept British authority in settling a local dispute. As a penalty, he was stripped of his title, his livestock, and his land. Suddenly impoverished, the family had to make adjustments. Nelson's mother was forced to take him north to her tiny hometown of Qunu, where they lived in a small hut and slept on straw mats.

Though life in the small village was simple, Nelson would always look back fondly on his time there. His days were spent tending to the animals and playing with the other village boys – stick-fighting; throwing rocks; playing hide-and-seek. Here, there was little exposure to the racist divisions that governed South African society.

Things changed dramatically, however, when Nelson was nine-years-old. News came that his father had died of lung disease. Before his death, Gadla was close friends with Chief Jongintaba, the regent of the Thembu people. When he knew his days were numbered, he'd asked Jongintaba to bring Nelson into his home and raise him like a son. Jongintaba agreed. So, when his father passed, young Nelson left his mother's village to join the regent's household, 10 miles away. He'd never live with his mother again.

He never forgot the day he arrived at the regent's palace. It was known far and wide as the "Great Place," and it was the most magnificent building he'd ever seen. The compound had two brick houses, which were surrounded by seven huge huts. Everything was painted white, which gave off a dazzling reflection in the bright Transkei sun. It had elaborate gardens in the front and the back, and fields stocked full of apple trees, cattle, and hundreds of sheep. The regent even drove his own car, a fancy Ford V8.

True to his word, Chief Jongintaba treated Nelson like a son. Before long, he was adopted into the royal family and groomed to be a counsellor to the regent's eldest child – a boy named Justice.

It was at the chief's home that Nelson learned how to be an effective leader. Members of the Thembu clan would visit from across Thembuland to settle disputes, which the regent listened to attentively. Nelson loved watching how he handled their claims. He wasn't just a careful listener, he also accepted criticism gladly. And like a wise shepherd, the regent led his flock from behind, allowing them to think they'd reached their decisions and resolutions themselves.

Later, when it came time to be a leader himself, Nelson would put these same principles into practice.

Following Xhosa tradition, when Nelson and Justice turned sixteen, they travelled to a secluded valley with other youths from the region and took part in an important rite of passage. It marks the transition from boyhood to adulthood, and so, when they returned to their homestead, they were officially received as adults, and deemed ready to lead the Thembu people.

Before settling into life as adults at the royal house, though, the regent wanted his sons to gain some career skills, and so sent them off to college. It was here that Nelson's ambitions would broaden.

At college, he was exposed to lots of new things, like modern toilets, hot-water showers, and toilet soap. He also made some of his first friends who weren't Thembu and discovered, much to his shock, that some of his teachers were actually married to people *outside* their clans.

Most importantly, though, this was where he was first introduced to the African National Congress, or ANC. The ANC was an organization dedicated to uniting African peoples against European rule, as well as ending the racist policies and laws that forbade them from owning land, voting, or traveling freely within their own country. And although Nelson didn't join the ANC at college, he was intrigued by their ideas. They challenged the Thembu-centric world in which he'd grown up. In time, these ideas would prove to be the most significant influence on his life.

After six years of college, Justice and Nelson were summoned home. The regent had a surprise for his two sons: he'd found them brides. They were to be married at once. The regent would hear nothing more of the matter. Justice and Nelson were shocked. As much as they respected the regent, they weren't interested in getting married and settling down at the palace. College had introduced them to the wider world, and they weren't ready to give it up.

So, they decided that their only option was to run away. They chose Johannesburg, an enormous city and urban hub north of Thembuland. It was the economic center of South Africa, and people were migrating from all over the country to work in the mines that rimmed the city.

Although Black South Africans couldn't travel outside their home regions without special passes, Justice and Nelson were able to trick a friend of the regent into drawing up some documents. And then, in the middle of the night in 1941, they made their escape. It would be nearly fifty years before Nelson would live in Thembuland again.

Chapter 2

Stunned by what they saw, Nelson and Justice fell silent as they approached the great city of Johannesburg. All they could see was a vast blanket of electric lights rising up in the distance. Before them lay a buzzing world they couldn't even begin to imagine.

With some fore-knowledge of the city, Nelson's dream was to put his education to work as a clerk in the mines. But the regent had sent word ahead to the manager: Don't hire my boys. Send them back. So, Nelson and Justice were forced to look for work elsewhere.

A cousin introduced Nelson to a man named Walter Sisulu. At the time, Sisulu ran a small real estate agency in Johannesburg whose focus was helping Black South Africans find housing in the city. He would become one of Nelson's closest friends and they'd both later spend decades together imprisoned on Robben Island.

Sisulu put Nelson in touch with a lawyer he knew named Lazar Sidelsky, who hired him as a legal clerk.

He loved working at the law office – Sidelsky was a liberal-minded man, and his firm handled cases for both Black and white South Africans. He could see Nelson's talent, and encouraged him to study law so he might open his own office one day. He also gave Nelson what he felt was sound advice: stay away from politics.

But as Nelson learned more and more about the discrimination Black people faced in Johannesburg, this became difficult. Friends like Walter Sisulu were becoming involved in the ANC, and encouraged Nelson to join them in the fight for full citizenship rights for Black South Africans.

So, he started attending local meetings, and eventually became a member of the ANC himself. With a group of friends, he created the Youth League, a younger, more militant wing of the ANC. Together, they drafted a manifesto calling for the different South African ethnic groups to come together and direct their collective energies toward ending white supremacy.

These were heady days for Nelson. Working at the firm, studying law, and leading the Youth League, he also found time to woo a young woman from the Transkei whom he'd met at Sisulu's house. Her name was Evelyn, and they married in 1945.

The Youth League had high hopes for the future of South Africa. Change seemed to be in the air. All around the world in the wake of World War II, colonial regimes were collapsing, and formerly-oppressed people were taking a leading role in shaping their nations' futures.

But, South Africa was about to take a very different path.

In 1948, white South Africans held a general election, where in a shocking turn of events, the ultra-racist National Party (or NP) won a sweeping victory.

The NP drew its support from the Afrikaner population, who were largely descended from Dutch settlers, as opposed to those with British or other European roots. Many leading figures in the Party were Nazi sympathizers who opposed South Africa's entry into the war on the side of the Allies, and took inspiration from Hitler's pseudo-scientific approach to perceived "racial difference." They campaigned on a platform of "apartheid," meaning "separateness," and their central focus was to preserve the power of the white minority through a blanket regime of racist laws.

Apartheid was a not a new concept, though. Since the 1800s, there were laws on the books that restricted the

freedoms of Black people. What apartheid proposed, however, was to expand and enshrine these restrictions in unprecedented ways.

In short order, the National Party passed a suite of new regulations. The Population Registration Act, for example, compelled all South Africans to carry IDs specifying their race. The Group Areas Act decreed that different races must live in designated areas. Other laws were passed that forbade mixed marriage, that banned sex between races, that segregated all public facilities, and that outlawed protest and dissent of any kind. This, the National Party announced, was only the beginning.

Around South Africa, people were shocked. In Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela's friend and fellow Youth League leader, Oliver Tambo, was less surprised: "Now we will know exactly who our enemies are," he said. The Youth League began preparing their response.

The ANC had always believed in working within the law to create change in South Africa. But the apartheid regime made this impossible. Mandela's Youth League began pushing the ANC to adopt a program of nonviolent resistance, inspired by Gandhi's actions in India. Eventually, the party leadership agreed.

On June 26, 1952, thirty-three Black South Africans in Port Elizabeth entered a railway station marked "Whites Only." Putting into practice a nonviolent approach, they also sang freedom songs as they staged this protest. They were all arrested and jailed. With Mandela taking a lead role in its planning and execution, this was the beginning of the legendary Defiance Campaign that embroiled the country for the next five months.

Across the country, tens of thousands of Black people took part in the Defiance Campaign, crossing segregated zones, burning pass books, and organizing strikes. So did the thousands of South African Indians, and the mixed population designated by the government as "Coloureds." This was a blow to the apartheid regime's notion that, by giving different races different privileges, it could sow division among the country's non-white population. In fact, the opposite occurred. In the wake of the Defiance Campaign, membership in the ANC swelled from 20,000 to 100,00, and included people who represented all the designated races.

The government responded with a rash of new apartheid laws, giving itself the right to declare martial law, to detain people without trial, and to use corporal punishment in prison. It also identified its new primary target: Nelson Mandela and the ANC.

Chapter 3

The next decade saw a blizzard of activity from Mandela. With his friend and fellow freedom fighter Oliver Tambo, he opened a law firm, Mandela and Tambo. Theirs was the only Black-led firm in South Africa, and it focused on cases of police brutality.

Meanwhile, Mandela had become a leading figure in the ANC, and was more determined than ever to end apartheid rule. After the Defiance Campaign, he was the government's public-enemy number one, and he'd spend the rest of his days hounded by the regime at every turn.

The government's first strategy was a system it called "bans." A ban was a legal order that forbade you from group activities, public gatherings, and travel of any sort. It even stipulated you couldn't attend your child's birthday parties. Violation of a ban meant imprisonment.

And so in the wake of the Defiance Campaign, Mandela received the first of his many bans. He was allowed to practice law, but forbidden from public gatherings.

Even so, he refused to slow down. Behind closed doors, in fact, he was busy organizing the ANC's newest strike against apartheid. This action would make news around the world.

In June 1955, a group of 3,000 people gathered in Johannesburg's Soweto township to listen to a reading. It wasn't just any reading. It was a reading of the Freedom Charter, a document many years in the making. Mandela, who'd been crucial in its creation, looked on proudly from the fringes of the crowd. To evade his latest ban, he'd come disguised as a milkman.

The Freedom Charter was a radical document: a constitution for a post-apartheid South Africa, drafted in secret councils across the country. It called for a total reimagining of the government, extending the right to vote to everyone, and distributing land fairly among all the country's residents.

The apartheid regime understood how threatening the Charter was to its hold on power – it gave voice to the 80% of the population who were disenfranchised. The non-white majority had come together, despite historical and racial differences, to articulate a different vision for their country. And they'd gotten the world's attention in the process.

Rather than listening to what they had to say, the National Party decided to respond with violence. Six months after the unveiling of the Freedom Charter, Mandela was awoken at dawn by a knock at the door. Security forces were stationed outside. They arrested him on the charge of high treason.

For the next five years he, along with 156 ANC leaders, would be embroiled in legal proceedings, which became known as the Treason Trial. The government's charge was that, in drafting the Freedom Charter, Mandela had called for the violent overthrow of the state. Technically, the state argued, this was treason. Punishment for treason was death.

Knowing the ANC's activities would be limited while it faced such drastic charges, the state sought to make the trial as expensive and time-consuming as possible. One of its many tricks was to move the venue from Johannesburg, where the defendants and their supporters lived, to Pretoria, the home of the National Party, forty-five minutes away. Nearly every day for five years, the defendants would commute back and forth between the two cities.

Under these conditions, Mandela struggled to find time for his family. After ten years together, in 1955, Evelyn announced she was leaving him.

Shortly afterward, however, he met a social worker named Winnie. They fell in love quickly, and resolved to get married in 1958.

Against the backdrop of the trial, Winnie's father was concerned about her new husband. At their wedding, he stood up to give a speech. Pointing to the uninvited security forces at the edge of the celebration, he warned Winnie that, while Nelson clearly loved her, he would also be equally devoted to the struggle. Winnie understood. In marrying Nelson, she was marrying the struggle herself.

Meanwhile, violence in South Africa was increasing. The government had started on a campaign of forced evictions of Black communities, clearing out valuable urban land for white settlers. Millions of Black South Africans were relocated into designated "Bantustans," a new form of territory set aside for them by the National Party administration.

Then, in 1959, tensions erupted in Sharpeville, another small township outside of Johannesburg. A crowd of peaceful demonstrators – thousands strong – had gathered at a police station to protest the ever-restricting pass laws. Suddenly, and without warning, police opened fire on them. When the smoke cleared, sixty-nine demonstrators were dead, 29 of whom were students. Most of them were shot in the back as they tried to escape.

In solidarity with the country's Black population, the rest of the world was outraged. Around 249 people lost their lives in the Sharpeville massacre. With the added international attention, the apartheid government responded by shifting responsibility for the massacre, and blaming communists for the violence. They followed up by initiating a new crackdown. As subsequent rioting broke out across the country, the National Party declared a State of Emergency and granted itself sweeping powers to suppress dissent. Over 18,000 people were caught up in mass arrests, and any involvement or support for the ANC was banned.

Although they hadn't been charged with anything, Nelson Mandela and his co-defendants were arrested as well. They were imprisoned in a tiny cell with no blankets, no toilets or toilet paper, and with little food. When they were released a few months later, they all agreed: a new stage of the struggle had begun.

Chapter 4

By 1961, the Treason Trial was drawing to a close. To everyone's surprise, the judge returned a verdict of "not guilty." Even for the biased judges, the state's case was too flimsy: The Freedom Charter was a manifesto for freedom, not a call for violence.

But Mandela knew this was only a temporary reprieve. With the ANC defined as an illegal organization, the state could find any pretext to arrest him again. It was at this point that he decided to go underground.

For the next year and a half, Mandela lived off-the-radar, moving around the country in secret. While security forces searched high and low, he started developing a new wing of the ANC, known as Umkhonto we Sizwe – the "Spear of the Nation." This wing signalled the end of the ANC's commitment to nonviolence.

The oppressors, Mandela observed, had set the terms of the struggle. The only way to respond to violence was with strength.

In exile, Mandela's fame spread as more and more people spoke up in support of his resistance. But life was difficult. He had little opportunity to see Winnie or the two daughters she'd recently given birth to. Still, he persevered.

The ANC leadership had in the meantime developed a twofold response to the apartheid government. First, they organized a series of sabotage operations aimed at infrastructure, machines, and power facilities that serviced state security forces. The goal was not to take lives, but to create lasting economic damage.

Second, they began drafting plans for a liberation army. Over the long term, the ANC believed, they needed to have the capacity to fight back against South Africa's security state. So, in 1962, Mandela snuck out of the country and started his tour through Africa to raise money for this objective. It was his first time leaving his homeland, and he was incredibly inspired by these visits to countries where Black people lived freely, moved freely, and even became heads of state.

But before plans could get off the ground, Mandela was discovered. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (or CIA), had given South African police a tip about his whereabouts. And so while driving from a meeting in Durban to meet Winnie in Johannesburg, his car was surrounded. Mandela was arrested once more, and taken to a Johannesburg prison. A trial soon began – he was accused of inciting strikes and leaving the country illegally. For this, he was handed a five-year prison sentence.

A year into his sentence, though, the government found documents proving that the ANC had initiated plans for a liberation army. So, Mandela, along with the leadership of the ANC, was again put on trial. If they were convicted, they faced the death penalty.

On this occasion, Mandela refused to mount a defence. He reasoned that doing so would only confer legitimacy to an unfair process. Instead, he stood and read a statement to the court. He'd been drafting it for months, and it took him three hours to read it aloud. Though it was long, the court listened, spellbound, as Mandela gave one of the most famous speeches of all time: "I Am Prepared to Die."

In the speech, he outlined his moral justifications for becoming a freedom fighter. He described the history of the ANC, its goals for a non-racial democracy, and the unfair treatment it'd received since the dawn of apartheid. It was a stirring and profound speech.

Afterward, as the world waited in anticipation for the verdict, more organizations and institutions showed their support for this inspirational leader. In London, Mandela was elected president of the University of London students' council, in absentia. A vote by the United Nations Security Council called for an immediate end to the trial, and the defendants to be released.

Nelson Mandela was prepared to die. He was proud of his conduct, and had no intention of pursuing an appeal if he were sentenced to death. But when the verdict came in, it took him by surprise. On June 12, 1964, he was instead sentenced to life in prison.

The next day, he was put on a government plane and flown to Cape Town. From there, a boat took him to a remote rock called Robben Island, a high-security facility where he and his fellow ANC comrades would be imprisoned. He expected to remain there for the rest of his life.

Chapter 5

Life on Robben Island was hard. The cells were damp, and prisoners had straw mats for beds. There was no running water, and the only toilet was a ten-inch bucket with a lid on top.

Contact with the outside world was severely restricted – prisoners were allowed to write and receive one letter every six months. Censors scrutinized every word, cutting out any political content. And so, very often, letters from Winnie would arrive in tatters.

Under the watchful eyes of abusive guards, the inmates were put to work in a quarry. The ANC group was kept separate from the other prisoners on the island. Mandela would later maintain that this was one of the state's biggest mistakes. Although the ANC leaders weren't supposed to communicate or talk, they found ways to sustain each other. Over the years, they formed an unbreakable bond. Soon, they were organizing strikes and demonstrations in the prison, and Mandela performed free legal work for other inmates.

They even gained small victories: One of Mandela's biggest triumphs on Robben Island was when he convinced prison guards to allow Black inmates to wear long pants, rather than shorts. Before that, pants were only reserved for Indian and Coloured prisoners – one of the small humiliations of life for Black inmates in this apartheid-era jail.

The years passed. Mandela was not allowed to attend the funerals of his mother and his eldest son Thembi, who'd died in a car accident.

Meanwhile, beyond the prison walls, tensions continued to rise in the country. In 1976, there was a massive student protest which took place in Soweto, the township where the Freedom Charter had first been presented. As they'd done in Sharpeville years before, the police, once again, responded with brutal violence, killing between 200 to 700 youth.

The world was horrified. The apartheid government faced increased international pressure, with many organizations leading boycotts of South African products, while other countries imposed harsh sanctions. The ANC was now led by Mandela's old friend and law partner Oliver Tambo. He was now living in exile abroad, and from there, continued to advocate for change. A "Free Mandela" campaign was launched and started to catch on worldwide.

Still, with the support of allies like the United States and Great Britain, the apartheid government remained in power.

In the 1970s, conditions on Robben Island started to improve, ever so slightly. Wives were now allowed to visit for longer than fifteen minutes, and for the first time in a decade, Mandela was allowed to see his children. Winnie was now also permitted to send photos, and after years of being forbidden to read newspapers or outside books, these were finally permitted.

Soon, so much learning was taking place that members of the struggle took to calling Robben Island "the University." Mandela led the charge, organizing a series of lectures for the prisoners. He himself taught a course in political economy. He also became an avid gardener, filling a small plot in the prison yard with dozens of plants.

At the end of the 1970s, Mandela was given a surprising offer. The minister of prisons visited Robben Island, and told him he could go free if he would acknowledge the legitimacy of the Bantustan governments. It didn't take Mandela long to give his answer. Absolutely not. He would never acknowledge the legitimacy of the apartheid state.

A new phase, however, had begun. Clearly, the government had realized the consequences, both moral and material, of keeping Mandela locked up.

In 1982, the ANC leaders were transferred off Robben Island to a newer, nicer prison in a suburb of Cape Town. Here, they started having a long series of discussions with the government. Repeatedly, year after year, the National Party government attempted to offer him a deal: if he would denounce the ANC as a terrorist organization, he could be released. Of course, Mandela refused. If they wanted him to walk free, apartheid had to be dismantled, and all South Africans granted equal rights as citizens.

Then, in 1990, the unthinkable happened. F.W. de Klerk assumed the role of president of South Africa, and although he certainly wasn't a liberal, he understood that there was no political future for South Africa if it continued to maintain apartheid. The pressure from around the world had grown too intense.

And so what amounted to a shocking turn of events, de Klerk agreed to hold talks with Mandela about an unconditional release. Mandela held fast to his line. The ANC needed to be legalized and apartheid brought to an end. At last, de Klerk consented. On February 11, 1990, after 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela was freed.

The day he walked free, with Winnie by his side, the streets of Cape Town were electric with anticipation and excitement. The ANC had hired a driver to take Mandela to City Hall, but the car got swallowed in the crowds. It took him nearly three hours to reach the podium. When at last he took the stage, aged and also frail from a recent bout of tuberculosis, he raised his fist in the freedom-fighter salute. "*Amandla!*" he cried. "*Ngawethu*," came the clear and mighty response from the crowd. "Power! To the people!"

Over the next year, the ANC negotiated with the National Party about South Africa's future. A transitional period was agreed upon, with the first free elections to be held in 1994.

A fierce campaign followed, and on April 27, at the age of seventy-five, Mandela cast the first vote of his life. Naturally, he checked the ANC on his ballot. So did millions of other South Africans. When the tallies came in, the ANC was the clear winner, which meant Nelson Mandela, the leader of the party, had been elected president – an office he would hold for the next five years. With tha, a new era for South Africa had begun.

After his release from prison, Mandela was able to fulfil his lifetime ambition of traveling the world – something that, as a Black man in South Africa, he'd been forbidden to do. Now a global icon, crowds greeted him wherever he went. It became routine for him to mingle with world leaders, pose for pictures, and sign autographs.

But one meeting in particular stuck out. Mandela had just finished his first trip to America, where he'd attended a joint session of Congress with George Bush Sr. Next on the agenda was Europe, where he'd meet Margaret Thatcher. As the plane crossed Canada, however, it had to make a sudden stop. It was low on fuel. And so in a remote area of the Arctic Circle called Goose Bay, the plane touched down. While waiting on the tarmac, Mandela decided to step out for some fresh air.

In the distance, he saw a group of Inuit children. Like the South Africans, the Inuit had faced years of oppression at the hands of colonizers. Even into the 1990s, Inuit children were forced to enrol in repressive schools where they were beaten, abused, and stripped of their culture.

As Mandela approached, the children started cheering. One of them was holding a sign. "Viva ANC!" it said. Mandela was astonished. How did these children know who he was? Beyond all imagination, on the opposite end of the earth, he'd inspired a new generation of freedom fighters. A humbling and profound realization, and a testament to his unflinching commitment to freedom.

The End

You've reached the end of this Bedtime Biography. Thank you for listening. Why not pause listening now so you can stay in a relaxed state? And if you're off to bed now, I wish you a good night's sleep.