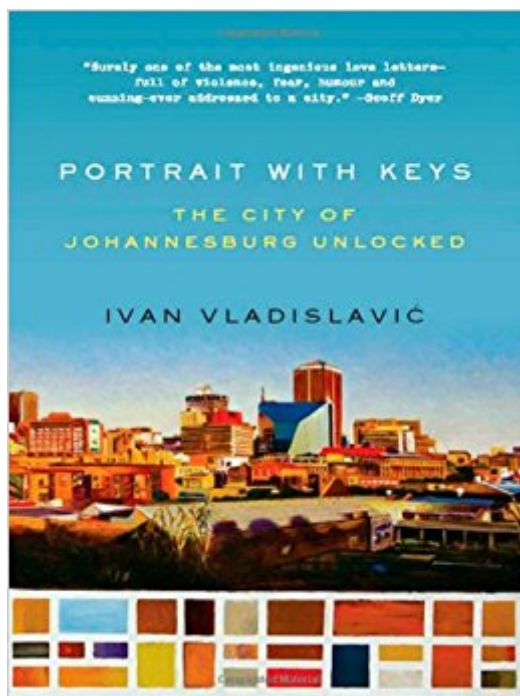


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# Portrait With Keys: The City Of Johannesburg Unlocked



## Synopsis

“Surely one of the most ingenious love letters – full of violence, fear, humour, and cunning – ever addressed to a city.” • Geoff Dyer This dazzling portrait of Johannesburg is one of the most haunting, poetic pieces of reportage about a metropolis since Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City*. Through precisely crafted snapshots, Ivan Vladislavic observes the unpredictable, day-to-day transformation of his embattled city: the homeless using manholes as cupboards, a public statue slowly cannibalized for scrap. Most poignantly he charts the small, devastating changes along the postapartheid streets: walls grow higher, neighborhoods are gated off, the keys multiply. Security – insecurity? – is the growth industry. Vladislavic, described as “one of the most imaginative minds at work in South African literature today” (André Brink), delivers “one of the best things ever written about a great, if schizophrenic, city, and an utterly true picture of the new South Africa” (Christopher Hope).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In a post-apartheid world, the city of Johannesburg is a complicated place: racial divides still run deep, inextricably interwoven with crime and poverty, and endlessly complicated as the haves and have-nots negotiate new arrangements defined in terms of protection, invasion, and a tenuous level of common feeling. Novelist and Johannesburg resident Vladislavic recounts his day-to-day experiences and examines them from a step removed, watching as his city grows more obsessed with security: walls grow higher, neighbors more suspicious, private security forces more prevalent (hired even for middle class dinner parties). Vladislavic is exploring revolutionary ground, providing

one of the most detailed looks yet at the post-apartheid city, helping define it as he ventures through it. Vladislavic can ramble, but does so with humor and care, while offering much insight on class and race relations, and urban survival in general; neither does he resort to overheated righteousness. While a certain amount of fluency in South African culture may be necessary to fully appreciate it, this book will intrigue any reader with its intense, you-are-there depiction of a city in flux. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Not your usual tourist view, this on-the-streets account by a white Johannesburg native is about what it is like to live there now, how it has changed since the end of apartheid and how it has not—the dynamics of the rich diversity, the sorrow and guilt of the continuing unemployment and desperate poverty, the vicious racism, the violent crime. The keys in the title may be metaphor, but they are rooted in fact—security being a constant obsession with anyone who has anything to lose—the absurdity of not knowing what all your keys are for anymore, the guilt about the hungry guard and those who live in manholes. Driven by fear, Vladislavic and his wife do try to leave, but they quickly return home to Johannesburg. Dickens is his model; he needs the “noisy rhythm outside his window” and “no move to the relative safety of suburban subdivisions will replace what is lost. In a series of sketches, the close-up detail reveals the place he loves, but readers will connect Vladislavic’s keys to those of other cities. --Hazel Rochman

the author was recommended to me through a friend still living in South Africa & i found this choice most enjoyable, even though it does draw a gloomy picture for a person who has lived in South Africa for as long as i have & realizing the changes that took place over the past 15 years, high unemployment, high crime rate & security measures i had to confirm with friends if they are really as described in some of the chapters. persons who have lived in South Africa will find the picture portrayed here equally interesting in my estimation.

The author has an uncanny ability to record minute details of everyday life. It was constructed from many different papers and short stories and reads like an amalgamation of thoughts. Personally as a prior resident of this country I enjoyed it but am not sure of it's broad appeal.

Exemplary writing - vivid, smart, thoughtful

Those of us who live in a city (or in my case cities), experience the location as a series of repeating and unique experiences. One block over is a once noble house, neglected and slowly disintegrating. This is the repeated image that forms a small but integral part of the bigger picture that is one's portrait of that city. And then one day as you pass the house you notice that a small plastic figure has been placed in an inset of wall surrounding that house. This small addition to the known makes it unique, adding reverberations that intersect with other images of that block, of that city. This short book consists of 127 portraits, or snapshots, of the author's Johannesburg. There is no pretense that this is an objective set of portraits, some definitive travel book of the city. No, these are personal, intimate portraits, places and things that together make the Johannesburg of this particular white resident. What makes the book so successful is a keen eye for detail and a facility for language that allows him to convey images with the exactly right words, the perfect objects taken to represent various facets of his city. One reoccurring image (I'm tempted to call it the key image of this book) is keys. Never discussed but clearly lurking behind these images is the reality of his city as increasingly violent and dangerous. A place where people are constantly taking steps to separate themselves from perceived danger. There are multiple locks on exterior house doors, and additional locks on the gates next to the sidewalk. Add more locks for car door and steering wheel locks, and the result is a large set of keys. While most writers would describe the danger, the author provides instead portraits of the keys, an image vivid and open to various interpretations. In one portrait a friend of the author realizes that a key has somehow found its way onto her key chain, and she has no idea where it came from, or what it unlocks. He goes to a hardware store and is told that every day people come in to replace their metal house numbers with plastic because the metal ones are pried off to sell as scrap. Increasingly people devise ways to avoid going out on the street. The "well-healed, well-wheeled" have even discovered a hidden door in the public library allowing those in the know to go directly from the parking garage to the library, a path not intended by the library's builders. Things are always changing, and the author refuses to read these changes as a failure of his city. It is instead a constant transformation that he carefully examines. "I am stripping the bedroom door down to the wood...I wish I could read these strata [like]...the rings of a felled tree, deciphering the lean seasons...instead I see nothing but fashion...nineties ochre, eighties ivory..."

I selected PORTRAIT WITH KEYS: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked by Ivan Vladislavic to read because I have an interest in other countries, cities and cultures. PORTRAIT WITH KEYS: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked is not the typical tourist book, rather it is an account of a white Johannesburg citizen and his view on the city and its current status with historical

references. Vladislavic is painstakingly honest with his portrayal of Jo'burg, often consider the Venice of the South. He highlights most scenery to be man-made; planted forests which are mine dumps covered with grass and plastic ducks within the stream at Montecasino. Jo'burg is a landlocked city with forced, man-made lakes. The author further illustrates a myriad of social ills amongst the residents such as unemployment and under-employment, poverty, racism, rampant crime and disrespect. As he navigates through the streets of Jo'burg, he paints them, its landmarks and its inhabitants as ugly. Written in detail, but often labored, a large amount of time is spent exhibiting the measures taken for protection and how crime and racism are intertwined with the infamous Gorilla lock. He also emphasizes the historical reference of the black man and the gorilla and the ever-present fear of its citizens. PORTRAIT WITH KEYS: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked does not paint a neat and pretty picture of Johannesburg rather a contrasting account of one man's version of his native homeland. Reviewed by Dawn R. Reeves of The RAWSISTAZ(tm) Reviewers

In a series of 128 beautiful interleaved passages Vladislavic describes the Johannesburg, and South Africa, that we live in today. Funny, humane, disturbing, insightful and brilliantly observed. I highly recommend this book by one of South Africa's best current authors.

This is a strange book. However, what I appreciated most about it was its ability to explore themes such decay and growth, loss and gain in a mature and almost haunting way. This is a book that has as much to do with Johannesburg as it has to do with Baltimore, Newark, or Hartford.

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