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# Book Review: Unshackled: My journey from the Township to the Boardroom

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Jeff van Rooyen's compelling autobiography "Unshackled: My Journey from the Township to the Boardroom" details the author's extraordinary ascension from the harsh brutalities of apartheid-era South Africa to the highest echelons of the corporate world. Mr Van Rooyen was born into poverty in the 1950s in the Alexandra township. His entire life narrative is one of tenacity, moral rectitude, and an unrelenting dedication to both professional and personal achievement.

I approached this book with little enthusiasm as I expected it would just be one of those stories about how a tycoon went "from rags to riches" but this was a completely different narrative. I was engrossed in Van Rooyen's story from the start because of his realistic depiction of the township's life, which was rife with crime, violence, and poverty. I won't go over Van Rooyen's recollection of trauma and suffering as I want to keep this review brief, even though it holds fascinating insights for the reader. Rather, I want to draw attention to the key fragments that contributed to his remarkable success.

**Discipline to strive for a higher education:** Van Rooyen was exposed to, yet not afraid to address, the systemic impediments that black South Africans endured during the apartheid era, such as forced relocations and restricted access to jobs and education. Despite these challenges, he persevered in his education. He finally achieved something he had dreamed of since he was a young man – becoming a chartered accountant. This was an impressive accolade considering his background and the barriers in place that made it difficult for black South Africans to succeed.

**Road to corporate stardom:** Van Rooyen's career path was distinguished by his aptitude of seizing opportunities as well as his defiance of the restrictions placed on him by apartheid. He launched his career in accounting and advanced swiftly, working for various prominent firms, including Deloitte, where he eventually attained the position of partner. His tenure at Deloitte was especially remarkable since he became a leader who advocated diversity and transformation while addressing the challenges of a mostly white corporate South Africa.

**Paying It Forward:** The story heavily emphasises Van Rooyen's accomplishments outside of the business sector. He believed in how this principle proved how acts of kindness build communities exponentially. He believed that "Paying it forward" can make the world a better place (even by a fraction). Van Rooyen was the driving force behind the Financial Services Board (FSB)'s transformation efforts to better represent South Africa's new democratic values. He wanted the FSB to become an institution that reflects fairness in opportunity despite race, gender and upbringing. He also established the Association for the Advancement of Black Accountants of Southern Africa (ABASA). Throughout the book, there are several references to his dedication to give back, as he continuously sought to improve the areas from which he originated.

## Embracing change

The book highlights how embracing change is a catalyst for growth. Van Rooyen emphasised the fact that if corporations want to survive in a democratic South Africa, they need to participate in a way that demonstrates corporate culture transformation and diversity. Van Rooyen demonstrated how the role of leadership can empower companies to embrace change and innovate, as well as build a talent pipeline into financial services.

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In conclusion, "Unshackled" strikes me as a tribute to a larger fight for social justice and equality that we still face in South Africa as well as a story of individual triumph. Van Rooyen's life narrative provides motivational proof, demonstrating how even the most difficult obstacles can be overcome with tenacity, moral leadership, and a strong sense of purpose. Anyone interested in corporate governance, South African history, or the path of overcoming adversity to achieve greatness should read this book.

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