

Bridging the Gap

All over the world, there are divides: victims and perpetrators; cops and robbers; neo-Nazis and queer communities; Hutus and Tutsis. In this innovative new book, Dutch author Maurits Chabot tells seven remarkable true stories about people from either sides of these divides who have managed to forgive and find compassion for each other.



How did the book come about?

I was working as an opinion editor at *de Volkskrant*, a progressive Dutch newspaper. We tried to open up polarised debates by publishing different points of view, but I often found that people simply doubled down on their own arguments rather than trying to understand the other side.

I began to feel that I needed to find an antidote to my own work as an opinion editor, a positive counterweight to the daily machinery of division. So I thought, what if I found the stories of people who had been on opposite sides of a conflict, and had been able to break the divide between them? I started looking for true stories of people who had stood on opposite sides of a conflict

but had somehow managed to bridge the divide. I wanted the book to include both geopolitical differences, such as the Rwandan genocide, and personal conflicts, such as a kidnap and a fatal car crash. I tried to find something universal in those stories, and I wanted to let the stories speak for themselves, I didn't want to preach. What can come from rapprochement? I suppose the book is basically a plea, for empathy, and for asking questions. It is a plea to hold on to real connections between real people. These stories are from Africa, the Middle East, Europe and US, but they have a universal theme.

"I think there are many beautiful souls behind 'enemy lines', but we've all simply been kept apart."

Although it's all true, the book reads like fiction. How did you go about collecting the stories, and how did you decide how to present them?

I came up with a list of conflicts that were current, and searched for known stories of two people on either side. I would read whatever was available about them - but that was just the start. For example, the case in Rwanda of Emmanuel Ndayisaba and Alice Mukarurinda, I read that he cut off her hand and was involved in killing her baby, but then, many years later, he asked her for forgiveness and they became friends. You can depict these facts, but you need to dig deeper to find an insight into how this change happened: I wanted to provide insight into the complexity of human relationships. How do people change, how do they change their attitude to their perceived enemy, and how do they change the way they see the world? In order to answer these questions, I had to speak to the people involved. I interviewed the people in the book over the course of two years, having extensive video calls. I want the reader to really understand them and their experiences, to see things from their point of view and realise how that point of view could change. The book is narrative non-fiction, it takes you into their lives.

Although many of the stories in the book are from before the advent of the internet and social media, do you think that social media has played a part in polarising people and dividing us?

Yes, I do. I think that there are many beautiful souls behind 'enemy lines', but we've all just been kept apart. I hope this book shows what can happen when you do meet someone you regard as an enemy. I believe that if more people were able to have honest, one-to-one conversations, the world would change. That may sound naïve or idealistic, but the stories in this book show that it can happen. It often begins simply, with questions: Why

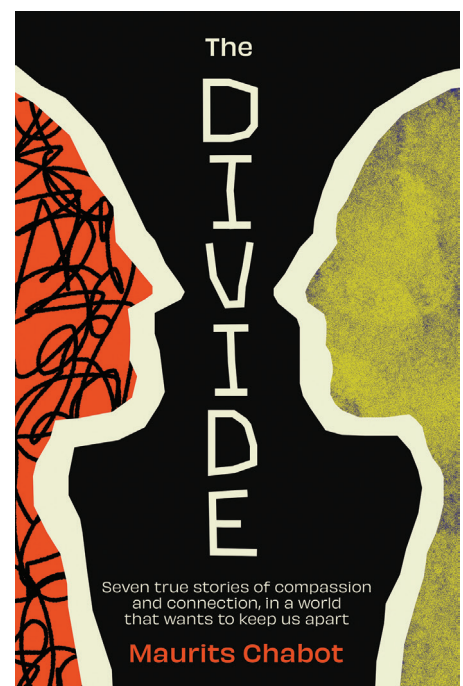
do you believe what you believe? What led you to these convictions? And, in some of the cases in this book, what led you to commit such terrible crimes? Being able to tell your story, and to feel that it has truly been heard, is crucial. It may sound so small, but small acts of understanding can lead to something much larger.

Which other authors inspire you in your writing?

I love narrative non-fiction, writers such as Joan Didion, Calvin Trillin, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe. They are giants. I admire their style, and the way they immerse themselves so completely in their subjects. I'm also a great admirer of Robert Caro. While working on his biography of Lyndon B. Johnson, and trying to understand the forces that shaped Johnson's character, he moved from New York to Texas and lived there for three years!

What do independent bookshops mean to you?

They're essential. I've just come from Paagman, the largest independent bookshop here in The Hague, it's like a second home to me. A good bookshop is an endlessly inspiring place. Good bookshops are deeply inspiring places: I love being surrounded by books that matter to me, and by books I have yet to discover. The best booksellers have an instinct for guiding you towards exactly the right one. I think a good bookshop can nudge readers and writers, and perhaps even the world itself, in the right direction.



The Divide: Seven True Stories of Compassion and Connection, in a World that Wants to Keep us Apart

by Maurits Chabot
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