So, Who is Nelson Mandela?

Do you like coffee table books? I know I do.

Sometimes there’s nothing nicer than picking up an outsize tome packed with illustrations, and relaxing with it over a coffee. Some are very light reads, others more substantial.
Strolling among the shelves of the Centre, I came across one of the more substantial kind – *The Illustrated Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela (published 1996). Having seen the 2013 film based on his memoirs, I spent a happy couple of hours absorbed in fascinating pictures, trying to assess how accurate the cinema experience had been. Who was Nelson Mandela? If I wanted to get to know him, I’d surely meet him in these pages.

Or so I thought…

We’ve looked at autobiographies before. They’re made up of what people tell us about themselves. *The Illustrated Long Walk to Freedom* did a great job of engaging my interest, but it also raised niggling questions. When it comes to world-famous individuals, can their autobiographies really tell us some ‘truth’ about them and the past? And just how does such an autobiography come into being?

I had a hunch *The Illustrated Long Walk to Freedom* wouldn’t be as straight forward as it seemed…

Firstly, the publishing details showed the original version had appeared in 1994. That big fat volume had been shortened (abridged) and transformed two years later into the beautifully-produced glorified scrapbook I was holding, containing excerpts of the text, now liberally interspersed with pictures. I wondered who’d decided what to leave out, and why.

Secondly, as I read, it became clear that producing the big fat original itself had been a far from simple process.

We all know Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for decades in apartheid South Africa. Well, in the 1970s, fellow political prisoners encouraged him to write the record of his life in secret to inspire others, organising the preservation and smuggling out of the manuscript at great danger to themselves in the form of microscopic shorthand notes. For years it lay dormant abroad, until Mandela resumed the process of recollection in the 1990s, after his release.

Old ANC comrades Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada had already worked tirelessly in prison to revive Mandela’s memories, and in his time-poor years as President of South Africa, those same stalwarts were responsible for completing the work. Ahmed in particular spent long hours revising, correcting and (as Mandela expressed it) “giving accuracy” to the story, whilst American author Richard Stengel collaborated with Mandela in editing, revising and writing later parts. Publishers Little, Brown edited the text, and Professor Gail Gerhart gave her thumbs up with a “factual review” of the manuscript.

Phew! What a team! Autobiographies aren’t always the simple documents we think they are, that’s for sure.

At least Mandela was honest. He made it clear that his memoir was the result of a complex process of writing, checking, adding, correcting, ordering, and finally approving a collectively-produced record. Presented from his point of view, the autobiography preserved only one perspective on the momentous times through which he’d lived.

So what does the book tell us about the past? And what does it tell us about Mandela? The cynics among us might say not a lot – political autobiographies are often just collections of partisan manipulations and self-justifications, so if there is some objective ‘truth’ to be told, you won’t find it in a political memoir. But in Mandela’s humane, dignified case, such a conclusion would be more than a little unkind.

When it comes to memory, it’s difficult to say there’s an objective ‘truth’ to be told. Don’t we all look back on life from our own particular angle, and isn’t the very process of thinking about and recording our views important in itself? What we think of our life and times, and how we react, learn and move on, can sometimes be more revealing than any dryly accurate catalogue of events…

You and I may think we’re ordinary. Nelson Mandela thought that of himself as well. But it was his unenviable fate to live at the epicentre of extraordinary times, dealing with extraordinary events. He went into prison a man and came out an icon, a myth in his own lifetime. His memoir therefore had to aspire to achieving a fine balance, between subjective personal anecdote and objective portrayal of an era.
So after all that, who was the real Nelson Mandela? Did I meet him in the pages of my coffee-table book? What do you think?

As well as *The Illustrated Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela (published 1996), the Centre has lots of books covering the apartheid era and its aftermath in South Africa. Come in and take a look. You might like to know that the original *Long Walk to Freedom. The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (published 1994) is available in the main library of The University of Manchester (for all you students out there) as well as in Manchester Libraries (for the rest of us).