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John W. Fredericks (Writer/Screenplay); *Noem My Skollie*. Director: Daryne Joshua. Language: Afrikaans with English and French subtitles; duration: 144 minutes; Year: 2016.

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Locally produced films in Cape Town attract a fair amount of interest amongst the locals, these included in the past, the likes of Leonardo DiCaprio's "Blood Diamond" (2006), Clint Eastwood's "Invictus" (2009), Denzel Washington's "Safe House" (2012) and most recently, "Noem My Skollie" (Call Me Thief) (2016). What sets *Noem My Skollie* apart from the rest is that it's an Afrikaans movie with English subtitles and features not only an all South African cast, but all the performers were chosen from Cape Town and the script was written and based on the true life story of John W. Fredericks, who is also the co-producer of the movie.

Noem My Skollie is set in apartheid Cape Town in the 1960s and provides its audience a window into the lives of four coloured teenagers (mixed race) growing up in an impoverished neighbourhood and roped into a life of poverty, crime and survival, but in the midst of all that was bad and undesirable then, the life story of John W. Fredericks also leaves the audience with a message of love and hope.

Fredericks was born into poverty. He is the son of an illiterate dirt collector who would bring books home from the rubbish dump for his son to read to him. As a kid, he spent his younger life on the rubbish dump in Kewtown (a working class coloured neighbourhood in Cape Town) scavenging for reading material and anything of value. This is how he developed his love for reading and writing which he says, he used as an escape to live out his daily fantasies and the life of poverty and crime. Even though he was born in the apartheid era, and everyone in the neighbourhood was poor and forced to accept the status quo as normal, books he read opened his mind and taught him that poverty and apartheid were not normal.

The story follows the lives of Fredericks, known in the movie as Abraham Lonzi (AB) and his three best friends, Gimba (glutton), Gif (poison) and Shorty. They did not want to join a gang, but they knew the strength there is in numbers and decided to make a pact, start their own little gang, "The Young Ones", named after a Cliff Richard movie they went to watch in the cinema. They vowed to stand together and be there to defend one another against the constant assault on them by other gang members. The Young Ones soon corrupted their innocence and dragged them into an unexpected world of theft, drug dealing and violence.

Fredericks' life takes a drastic turn when at the age of 17, he and Gimba are sentenced to serving two years in prison for breaking into a local store. At the time, there was no segregation between juveniles and adults in prison. They were placed with hardened adult

inmates and their innocence and young age immediately made them vulnerable to ill treatment and sexual abuse. Whereas Gimba became the concubine of Gums, the prison gang boss, Fredericks's knack for storytelling stood him in good stead. He soon became a favourite amongst the hardened inmates, from developing his storytelling in front of the fire to his three friends, the prison now became his stage and the inmates, his audience. Other duties which he performed in prison to escape ill treatment and sexual abuse, included writing songs and letters on behalf of inmates. These moments of storytelling in the prison cell offered not only him, but all the inmates a way to escape their situation, if only temporarily. These stories he sucked out of his thumb and used the inmates as characters in the stories. This allowed the inmates to feel as if they were part of the story.

The movie can be divided in three parts; growing up with his three friends and developing ways to survive; time in prison, which occupies the bulk of the movie, and life and the choices he makes after his release. *Noem My Skollie* is much more than the story of a kid caught on the wrong side of the law and spending two years in prison telling stories, it goes way beyond that. *Noem My Skollie* is a sombre, sobering and brutally honest in dealing with socio economics of poor coloured people in Cape Town during apartheid. It shows people drinking, gambling, dealing and doing drugs as it follows the lives of the four teenagers, whose circumstances are shared by the many of the youth in Cape Town who today grow up in neighbourhoods characterised by gangs and gang violence. Fredericks however, decides not to remain a victim of his circumstances, upon his release from prison, he meets Jenny, his sweetheart who protects, persuades and discourages him from doing more crime. They end up getting married two years after his release, and they are still together more than 50 years later. Gimba, Gif and Shorty however, are involved in the murder of a taxi driver, a crime Fredericks most likely would have partook in, if he had not spent that evening walking Jenny home from work. The murder results in all his three childhood friends being sentenced to death.

In the midst of all the hard hitting realities of violence and crime, the theme of friendship and love plays a central role throughout the story. The movie starts with four friends and the love they have for one another which plays out in them vowing to protect one another from the assault by local gang members. These four friends vow to be family of one another, "*Jy's my broer AB*" - you are my brother AB, remarked Gif after being ambushed and assaulted along with the others while they sat in their little shack roasting penny polonies and smoking slow boats while listening to AB telling stories at the fire. The other instance happens years later and is what leads to AB and Gimba breaking into a shop to steal a radio which Gimba thinks his father would like, "*My toppie sal mos die radio likes*" - my dad would love this radio. The two break into the shop while the other two friends act as look outs for the police.

Love for family is also displayed throughout, the young AB is comforted by his mother when he wakes after having a nightmare. Love is also displayed no more so than when AB's mother is accidentally killed trying to protect his father when they are ambushed by members of a rival gang inside their house while AB is serving time in prison. They were attacked in their house out of revenge for a previous hit he had carried out on one of its leaders. Finally, AB falls in love with Jenny and it is this love that is ultimately responsible for saving his life.

In this sense, the story of Fredericks is so much more than a *skollie* - thief, it's a story of life and the power of love and how a young man who has dropped out of school after completing grade 8 to surrender to being a thief, navigates all the challenges and episodes of

life, crime, poverty, discrimination, racism, even rape and imprisonment, to grab life's chances through the beauty of love.

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