

IN A RAIN OF DUST

**DEATH, DECEIT,
AND THE LAWYER WHO**

**BUSTED
BIG
ASBESTOS**

DAVID KINLEY



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Death, deceit and the lawyer who busted big asbestos

David Kinley

Review by Michal Singer

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025, 344 pgs, R460.00.

[Available at Clarke's Bookshop](#)

Introduction

David Kinley's *In a Rain of Dust* is an unusually gripping work of legal, environmental, and social history – a book that transforms one of South Africa's most devastating and least discussed industrial tragedies into a vivid, morally urgent narrative. Looking at the legal arguments and scientific facts through the human lens of lawyer Richard Meeran's investigation provides more visibility than a straightforward academic examination would.

Centred on the landmark transnational class action suit brought against British-based firm Cape PLC between 1997 and 2003, the book recounts how more than 7,500 South African miners and community members sought redress in the English courts following decades of unconscionable asbestos exposure. What distinguishes the book is not simply the scale of injustice it documents, but the way Kinley structures an extraordinarily complex and technically dense story into a book that is both digestible and deeply human.

Understanding the 'miracle mineral'

In a Rain of Dust is compelling not only because of its investigative depth but because of the careful narrative scaffolding that guides readers through difficult terrain: asbestos epidemiology and its slow, interminable violence; economic imperialism and transnational jurisdiction; corporate archives and apartheid labour practices. For those unfamiliar with asbestos mining, or for those who know it only through fragmented debates and public silence, this structure carefully and dispassionately provides an essential interpretive function to understand



asbestos as “extraordinary as it is ruinous” (Kinley, 2025, p. 62). Kinley’s telescopic structural choices make this book accessible without diluting the enormity of its subject.



*Above: Children playing on an asbestos tailings dump in Mafefe in the early 1980s.
Below: Asbestos lined trails in between homes in Mafefe, 1984.
Photos: Marianne Felix*





*Trail with exposed asbestos, Penge, December 2008.
Photo: Michal Singer*

What could easily have been a dry and dense procedural report becomes something closer to a quest narrative. Richard Meeran is introduced as a determined protagonist confronting a powerful multinational. By centring Meeran as “Indiana Jones with a law degree”, Kinley provides a narrative focus that guides readers through the maze of jurisdictional argument and evidentiary burden that hangs over the case (Kinley, 2025, p. 52).

In Chapter 2, Kinley introduces the isolated communities scattered across two culturally distinct regions – specifically Mafefe and Penge in Limpopo and Prieska and Koegas in the Northern Cape – where rich deposits of amphibole asbestos had been mined for nearly a century with little, if any, concern for the safety and health of workers. The title of the book itself is sourced from a 1962 site visit by the Cape’s medical officer, who noted that “men were working in a rain of dust” (Kinley, 2025, p. 50) The same men would later “quietly” die in their homes in the villages surrounding the mines, “off the company books” (Kinley, 2025, p. 4).



*Ruins of a mine compound in Penge, December 2008.
Photo: Michal Singer*

Kinley's choice to examine legal argument through the lens of human experience rather than through legal, academic, and political records prepares the reader for what is to come. It is here that my own research experience intersects with Kinley's narrative. When I visited Mafefe in 2005 as a postgraduate student, I expected to discuss irrigation schemes and social development. Instead, residents who agreed to speak to me shared stories of their loss – all attributed to asbestos exposure. Kinley's narrative echoes this trajectory of discovery, where the hidden history of asbestos is revealed through the lives it most adversely affected. I was struck by the pathos depicted by Kinley in his portrayal of Cape PLC's own medical officials struggling to reconcile the link between asbestos mining and mesothelioma.

Chapter 3 introduces asbestos-related disease in a way that is both readable and horrifying through stark imagery and metaphor. Asbestos fibres are likened to alien vegetation clogging up the lungs; and the lungs are compared to a swimming pool except "the regional lymph glands cannot be cleaned" (Kinley, 2025, p. 54) – rendering the medical science simultaneously vivid and legible.



Segment of amphibole asbestos, Mafefe, 2005.

Photo: Michal Singer

Historical and political scaffolding

Having established the foundations of the case, Kinley then widens the narrative lens. Explorations of the technicalities are strategic – as we grow to understand the medical science, the labour practices appear even more egregious. Kinley’s analysis exposes how the asbestos industry, opaque at the time and long gone from South Africa by the 1990s, used tactics to distance itself from possible risk, and seemed adept at minimising their liabilities through optics – at times renaming reports and even the name of the company to avoid attention and accountability.

Chapter 5 outlines labour practices in asbestos mines, placing the company firmly within the political economy of racial capitalism, and leaving no room for their plausible deniability. Kinley shows how apartheid’s labour system underwrote their profit model: White workers enjoyed protections (though inadequate), while Black and Coloured workers laboured in clouds of dust with no protection to save costs. Showers were eventually introduced for White workers, while lack workers carried asbestos home in their hair and clothing. This gross negligence was enabled by a willingness (by Cape PLC) to live with blatant double standards between regulations for their British workers as opposed to their South African workers (Kinley, 2025, p. 94). Kinley



further illustrates in this chapter that the long latency period of asbestos-related disease, ranging from 10 to 30 years following exposure, further obscured the connection between the activities of the industry and the epidemiological disaster that lay in the industry's wake.



*A sample of asbestos on display outside the former site office, Penge, 2008.
Photo: Michal Singer*



Abandoned mine in Penge, Limpopo, December 2008.

Photo: Michal Singer

A gripping narrative of corporate manipulation

Kinley documents the deliberate suppression of public awareness around health risks by Cape PLC in what he describes as a “malady of manipulation of scientific process and deceit in the delivery of its results” (Kinley, 2025, p. 55). As Meeran and his team uncover hidden reports, reissued documents, and internal memoranda, the tragic scale becomes more apparent. Given all that he learnt, Meeran was compelled to ensure that the case would be tried in the UK, where Cape PLC could be held accountable.

In a Rain of Dust shows incontrovertibly that Cape PLC knew about the dangerous situation they had created and did not act. In preparing for the case, Meeran and the team exposed unequivocal evidence of their actions; though 1968 asbestos safety laws in the UK had led to the closure of Cape PLC’s factory in Barking, London, Cape PLC continued to ignore the known risks of asbestos exposure for over a decade in South Africa before divesting in 1979. Kinley notes the similarity of accounts of occupational health exposure of workers



*Homestead in Betlea, an area of Mafefe, 2005.
Photo: Michal Singer*

between the 1940s and the 1970s, a lengthy period when it would be expected that conditions would have improved or evolved over time. All of this helped build their case against Cape PLC.

From outrage to mobilisation

Kinley has written a masterpiece that addresses a painful lacuna in South African mining history – even travelling to Penge to follow in Meeran’s footsteps to see for himself the devastation on land and community. He sensitively portrays the toll of the case on Meeran, but refuses to romanticise him as a ‘saviour’. Kinley shows a universal compassion and curiosity for the human condition – even toward those afflicted with moral confusion around the belief that asbestos risks could somehow be contained or ignored. Still, he makes no excuses – revealing with forensic precision the pervasive double standards bolstered by apartheid capitalism.

By Chapter 7, the book has built up enough emotional and evidentiary weight to show why the court case was unavoidable.



*Abandoned golf course with club house in Penge, December 2008.
Photo: Michal Singer*

Thousands of claimants – many gravely ill – signed or marked affidavits with thumbprints in preparation for their day in the English courts. This resonated with my first field visit in Mafefe where I was, inexplicably, presented with ID documents and death certificates during my interviews. The context that Kinley's book provided finally allowed me to understand why those documents meant so much.

The case plays out in the final chapters with mixed blessings – while the case was settled, and claimants received compensation, the damage was already done, and the inevitability of further loss cast a long shadow over its outcome. The narrative structure in chapter 8 mirrors the process of litigation itself, bringing readers into the courtroom with alternating correspondence, hearings, and appeals. The final chapter emphasises the persistence of asbestos in both landscape and policy: by 2018, only 40 of 261 contaminated sites had been rehabilitated. Kinley refuses to offer false closure.



Exposed rock face with asbestos, Penge, December 2008. Photo: Michal Singer

Conclusion

In a Rain of Dust is far more than a chronicle of litigation. It is a masterpiece of narrative structure, as Kinley renders a murky catastrophe legible without sanitising its violence. His prose is accessible yet exacting; his pacing measured yet urgent. For scholars, policymakers, and activists concerned with environmental justice, corporate accountability, and the afterlives of extractive industries in the Global South, this book is essential reading.

BIOGRAPHY

Michal Singer graduated with a Master's degree in history by research from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2010. Her work on South African mining pollution received the African Thesis Award from the African Studies Centre Leiden in the same year. She has spent the past 15 years working in archives, specialising in the preservation and stewardship of primary research collections. Since 2019, she has served as Principal Archivist in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Libraries' Special Collections where she supports the overall restoration of Special Collections' research support services, collection development, and recovery of archives that survived the 2021 fire in UCT's Jagger Library.



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