Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre:

If Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre could rewrite all our history books, we would love reading and learning about the past; then perhaps we wouldn’t go on making the same or similar mistakes and would be better masters of our destinies. Even though we in South Africa did not go through a horrendous period of violence such as devolved on the Indian subcontinent with partition, nevertheless much of what is reported about independence in Freedom at Midnight can be applied to the situation in our country.

Collins and Lapierre present the events leading up to partition, the terrible suffering that resulted from it and the anguish of all those involved in it, in such vivid detail that they plunge us right into the midst of politicians, rulers and fanatics consumed by disparate ideologies and ambitions, filled with ethnocentric prejudices, demanding independence, demanding partition, demanding at any cost. This book, clearly illustrates how political leaders, blinded by their political outlooks, act without consideration for the people they desire to govern. How could they have agreed to partition without consulting the governed; how could they have agreed without taking into consideration the devastation that partition would mean for ordinary people, how could they have rushed into independence and partition without making the necessary preparations for that vast uprooting and resettling of people. Instead they proudly announced independence and left the people to make their own way into the newly proclaimed states. As most of them had been settled in their homes for generations, they were not keen to move and violent fanatics, through the most brutal murders and mutilations, rape and looting, took it upon themselves to ensure that Muslims would be moved to Pakistan and Hindus to India.

Though the book presents Mountbatten as an admirable, very capable and efficient administrator, one, who against his will, is forced to agree to partition, he still is a man of war. He treats the whole matter of independence as the aftermath of a war and goes into negotiation to reach a swift settlement that will allow the British, the vanquished in this case, to withdraw as quickly and as honourably as possible. The book begins with Mountbatten, his appointment as Viceroy and his determination to bring the situation to a speedy end.

And the only one standing out against partition, is a man of peace, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Detractors of Gandhi should read Freedom at Midnight to understand why he is a Mahatma, a great soul. He is not presented as a saint but as a very human being, but he comes as close, perhaps closer, to being a saint than many who have been canonised. He made war not on others but upon himself; his weapon was the fast and he offered up his life through starvation, over and over, to prevent conflict between Muslims and Hindus. But people with strong agendas, like the assassins who brought his life to an end, like Mohammed Ali Jinnah, couldn’t understand the very basic principle that ruled Gandhi’s life, the principle that we call ubuntu.

Collins and Lapierre using the techniques of novelists and thriller writers tell a very absorbing, exciting, suspenseful and tragic story that brings to life all those involved in the conflicts and clashes that gave birth to Pakistan and India and turned the acquisition of independence into a bloodbath. They present us with intimate portraits of people from all walks of life, from peasants
to politicians, maharajahs and assassins and leave us with tremendous sadness at the
careless, inhuman treatment of ordinary people. Only Gandhi, who lived among ordinary
people, among untouchables, understood the terrible consequences that the actions of
politicians would foist on the poor, uncomprehending millions who would bear the brunt of their
hasty, ill-conceived and inhumane decisions. For me, the authors simply confirm that people in
pursuit of power have no time to be human and humane.