This book explores the complex and relevant concept of cultural identity in post-colonial or post-apartheid South Africa. Distiller does this by examining South Africa’s long standing and complicated relationship with the English language and Shakespeare as a signifier of that culture and literary education. She illustrates this through South Africa’s rich Shakespearean literary and political history, dating back to the early colonial mission schools, claiming that important writers and thinkers had an intellectual as well as emotional connection to his writings.

The term “coconut” in its rawest form indicates someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside, and according to Distiller is a concept reliant on old colonial-Apartheid binary logic in which one is “either/or”. Either authentically African and everything it entails, or European/white and everything associated with it. This binary logic is easily understandable due to the ongoing socio-economic inequality, as well as the violent and oppressive past. With this book she hopes to reclaim the coconut by attempting “to challenge the negative implications of the accusation of ‘coconutinness’, while still retaining an awareness of the histories of power that gave the term its bite.” This “reclaimed coconutinness” is a version of South Africanness, which cannot be captured by binary logic, and is rooted in the country’s history, yet rarely acknowledged.

The book’s investigation of the complex history of English and Shakespeare in South Africa since the mission schools and what it meant for the new class of Africans, concludes that owning these, was not only a means of social, economic and personal advancement during colonial times but also useful for opposing the Apartheid system. Many local writers, notably Solomon Plaatje, appropriated Shakespeare as a means of shaping their political views, which aimed to attack the colonial system by illustrating its shortcomings, as well as a means of preserving their own local culture and language. Such is the example of Plaatje’s translation of A Comedy of Errors into Setwana. These writers show that there existed a rich Shakespearean tradition in South Africa.
The use of Shakespeare in post-apartheid South Africa, however, reinforces values we should be moving away from and which are very limiting in terms of the possibility of a South African identity. Some writers emphasized the rejection of colonial imports and history in search of an authentic African literature and experience. Such a view promotes the idea that the figure of the ‘coconut’ is an agent of ‘whiteness’ who will inevitably suppress or reject his or her African roots in hope of socio-economic advancement or acceptance. However, the idea that, “To be black one cannot own English and modernity is reductive and ignorant of a very rich and important local history.” Other writers attempted to draw parallels between Elizabethan England and Africa which, despite its intention, depicted African life as premodern, chaotic or barbaric. Such parallels invoked the justification of the colonial system rather than questioned its implementation.

Distiller dedicates a whole chapter to the use of Shakespeare in post-apartheid South African schools, which is the place most South Africans encounter Shakespeare for the first time. However the way Shakespeare is taught at school does not recognize the rich Shakespearean tradition exemplified by Plaatje and other writers. She also explores the challenges of teaching Shakespeare in school, as well as looking at some of the modern “tailored editions” of his plays and to what extent they can be successful or inadequate.

The post-apartheid use of Shakespeare raises questions as to his role or place in South Africa. Distiller explores the use of Shakespeare as part of political discourse by Thabo Mbeki, and his notion of the “African Renaissance” which encodes this revised meaning of the coconut, and the “tragedy that the coonuttiness he has come to stand for entails the signification of Shakespeare which bears very little relevance to Africa.”

Shakespeare wrote his plays to mirror European society, its moral corruption and soul destroying capabilities. That is precisely how his oeuvre should be read. However trying to connect him to some sort of uniquely African identity or struggle can be problematic and make him seem irrelevant or outdated, not to mention elitist. Nevertheless many local writers, who knew how to read Shakespeare, adopted his writing to shape their political views, which they could use in a fight against injustice and oppression. But due to the complex history of English in this country and its turbulent past and present, the role of Shakespeare, considering who brought him and why, is confusing. “If for Plaatje, Shakespeare was an embodiment of what English had to offer, in our time, Shakespeare may be the embodiment of its empty promise.”