

Crime Fiction, South Africa: A Critical Introduction

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Crime fiction is an emergent category in South African literary studies. This introduction positions South African crime fiction and its scholarship in a global lineage of crime and detective fiction. The survey addresses the question of its literary status as ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowbrow’. It also identifies and describes two distinct sub-genres of South African crime fiction: the crime thriller novel; and the literary detective novel. The argument is that South African crime fiction exhibits a unique capacity for social analysis: a capacity which is being optimised by authors and interrogated by scholars.

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Theorising and Historicising an Emergent Literary Category

In the last decade, the accessibility, popularity, commercial success and, in some cases, the artistic merit of South African crime fiction have captured the attention of critics and literary scholars in South Africa and abroad. Although a comprehensive study has yet to be published, debates are rife in public media fora, literary festivals and conferences. Literature departments across South Africa are offering courses on the subject and there is an increasing number of postgraduate research students who are working in the field. While the media revels in reviews of the latest ‘krimi’ and often features profiles of celebrity authors, scholarly articles have been few and far between, focusing on specific authors or isolated topics. With this special issue of *Current Writing*, which serves to survey the field generally as well as offer detailed analysis, literary scholarship on South African crime fiction is significantly augmented and, it is hoped, will encourage further studies of a worthwhile object of enquiry.

Further afield the scenario is somewhat different. In the UK and the USA the canonisation of crime fiction by the academic community is *fait accompli* (Black 2010; Priestman 1990). Heta Pyrhönen’s historicisation of the criticism and theory of crime and detective fiction (2010) covers four stages, beginning with G K Chesterton’s aesthetic defence in 1902 of the detective story: it is “a perfectly legitimate form of art,” wrote Chesterton, its “first essential value” consists in the fact “that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life” (qtd. in Haycraft 1946: 4). Pyrhönen’s overview covers the structuralist studies of narrative and generic features in the

1960s, the focus on culture, society and ideology which developed in the 1970s and 1980s,¹ and more recent criticism of ideology and contestation as the genre expands to cover themes such as race and class. Today a wide range of critical approaches, including ethics, strategies of reading, psychoanalysis, feminism and postcolonialism are in use, and the body of scholarship, like the literature, is particularly fecund.

One of the most influential publications in the last decades is Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen's *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006). In this volume, the editors are intent on interrogating the "interrelation between colonial authority, crime and literature" (4) and the result is a body of scholarship which convincingly shows how postcolonial crime fiction, whilst demonstrating social detection as well as criminal detection, has extended and re-shaped the genre to address notions of community, beliefs, race, gender, and socio-political and historical formations – what the editors refer to as "postcolonial 'genre-bending'" (5).

The existing criticism of South African crime fiction falls markedly into Pyrhönen's third phase of criticism – that which engages with ideology and contestation, and South African crime fiction certainly displays the features, preoccupations and 'genre-bending' which Matzke and Mühleisen's 'postmortem' reveals. To begin, Michael Green, in "The Detective as Historian: A Case for Wessel Ebersohn" (1994) presents a prescient account of crime fiction's capacity for historical and social analysis. This argument is taken up and extended by Geoffrey Davis in "Political Loyalties and the Intricacy of the Criminal Mind: The Detective Fiction of Wessel Ebersohn" (2006), in which Davis claims that in each of the Yudel Gordon novels "the investigation of a single case widens out into an analysis of the 'condition of the nation itself'" (186). Widening the critical lens, Muff Andersson's "Watching the Detectives" (2004) considers popular detective fiction, with its focus on ideology, as a significant 'postcolonial' development in African literature. Using Bakhtin's notion of "double-voicing", Andersson places Deon Meyer's *Dead at Daybreak* (2000) in such a category, in which the reader is forced to engage with themes of corruption and the abuse of women and children, albeit in an "upbeat" form (2004: 143). More recently but, in my view, somewhat regressively, Michael Titlestad and Ashlee Polatinsky's "Turning to Crime: Mike Nicol's *The Ibis Tapestry* and *Payback*" (2010) is critical of crime fiction as a genre which lacks ideological commitment and which abandons history and politics in favour of generic conventions that offer the reader escapism and

consolation. Lone voices in this sphere, Titlestad and Polatinsky offer a limited and arguably supercilious reading of both Nicol and South African crime fiction in general.

Continuing the interrogation of the genre's capacity for social analysis, Ranka Primorac, in "Whodunnit in Southern Africa" (2011),² which is part of the Africa Research Institute Counterpoints Series, focuses on Meyer's *Dead before Dying* (1996) and, like Andersson, also considers South African fiction in its African context. Describing the history of crime fiction as a colonial import in Africa and its commitment to "social and political responsibility and ethics" (2), as well as how the texts "participate in in a public dialogue concerning the future of the democracy, citizenship and nationhood" (3), Primorac argues that Meyer is engaged in dialogue across cultural boundaries. She sees the 'rebirth' of the individual, in Meyer's case, of his detective, Mat Joubert, as symbolic of the rebirth of the nation. The most recent scholarly publication on specifically South African crime fiction, Christopher Warnes's "Writing Crime in the New South Africa: Negotiating Threat in the Novels of Deon Meyer and Margie Orford" (2012), offers a rebuttal to Titlestad and Polatinsky, and asserts "the notion that an integral function of crime fiction is the negotiation of social anxiety" (984). Warnes, together with most of the above scholars, recognises the unique hermeneutic capacity of South African crime fiction. He sees the reading of this literature as a means of engaging with anxieties which derive from the threat of bodily harm, and also broader and more diffuse anxieties to do with social and political instability.

A massive contribution to South African crime fiction and its criticism has been made by doyen, Mike Nicol, whose blog site, *Crime Beat*, has functioned for many years as the main forum for critical debate and opinion in South Africa. Nicol's reviews, interviews, and research have performed a vital role in creating and sustaining interest in this field. For example, Nicol's research covers various media for the last decade and notes that about fifty crime fiction novels have been published in South Africa in that time by twenty-two published authors of the genre.³ Like many other critics in the public media fora, Nicol wears two hats. He is also an author who is praised for the panache of his slick prose style, and his thriller trilogy -- *Payback* (2008); *Killer Country* (2010); and *Black Heart* (2011) -- is reminiscent of and on par with the best of American hard-boiled and *noir* fiction.

In the global context it is necessary to venture beyond Pyrhönen's survey to note that the first history of the genre, *Murder for Pleasure*, was published in 1941 by Howard Haycraft, who

also edited the first anthology of critical essays, *The Art of the Mystery Story* (1946). This anthology remains one of the more authoritative and provocative critical works in the field.⁴ However, it is possible to go back even further. Joel Black, in his review of scholarship on crime fiction, suggests that Thomas de Quincey offered one of the first criticisms of the genre in his 1854 publication, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”, in which he focuses on his debt to *Macbeth* while “drawing on Edmund Burke’s and Immanuel Kant’s philosophical insights into the aesthetics of violence and the sublime” (2010: 79). Such influences enter into De Quincey’s works of fiction which combine true-crime narratives with elements of the literary and philosophical. Writing in the 1970s, Michel Foucault analysed this nineteenth-century phenomenon of depicting the murderer as an artist, a phenomenon he describes as “the aesthetic rewriting of crime” (1977: 68). This points to the origins of the genre in true-crime, or criminal non-fiction: that is, in “historical chronicles, trial transcripts, newspaper reports, prison memoirs, and public confessions” such as *The Newgate Calendar* (Black 2010: 78). Anneke Rautenbach’s article in this issue, “‘Every Technique Known to Prose’: The Aesthetics of True-Crime in Contemporary South Africa”, examines the sub-genre true-crime, which historically precedes the popular fictional genres which are widely disseminated and read today. In the nineteenth century, in fictional texts derived from true-crime, the real-life murderer is the protagonist; the psyche of the criminal is thus dissected.

With the successful publication of what some scholars identify as a sub-genre of crime fiction, detective fiction also first appeared in the nineteenth century. The protagonist is the *detective* and the reader is invited to identify with the hero who solves the puzzle or the mystery. Increasingly, criticism has treated detective fiction as an art form. But just as there were scholars who championed the genre, there were detractors who denounced it as ‘lowbrow’. One of the early and most influential detractors of detective fiction was the poet, W H Auden. In his 1948 essay, “The Guilty Vicarage”, he describes detective fiction as escapist fantasies (qtd. in Winks 1980: 15), in which the reader identifies with the detective, but is estranged from the suffering of the criminal, or the victim. Such a stance has remained influential in evaluations of both crime and detective fiction as less than ‘high-brow’ literature.

In South Africa the point is carried into the ‘genre snob’ debate concerning the cultural status of South African crime fiction: is it ‘high-brow’ or ‘low-brow’; is it credibly representative of a turbulent and crime-ridden society, or is it just sensationalist, escapist, marketable

entertainment limited by generic conventions? Contentiously, there have been arguments for South African crime fiction to be considered as *bona fide* South African literature, some even claiming for it the status of the new ‘political novel’ in post-apartheid South Africa.⁵ There have been celebrations of its propensity for socio-political analysis, its offers of catharsis and vicarious justice in an unremitting social landscape, its power to delight and its potential to instruct. Conversely, commentators have warned against the precarious ideological positioning of a literary category which is aimed at high-sales volumes and easy consumption while, at the same time, attempting socio-political analysis of the gravest issues facing the nation. Detractors see crime fiction as straddling the imperatives of artistic merit and commercial success, and their trenchant question is: how can a literary category which relies on voyeurism, graphic violence and hyperbole be afforded the status of an academic object of enquiry alongside ‘great’ literature, or a sociological tool in a context in which crime is a scourge. Contained in these questions and debates is a compelling thrust to investigate the emerging and evolving subject, to open up debate and foster rigorous scholarship.

For the purposes of this survey, the designation crime fiction functions as an umbrella term. It refers to all fictional literature which represents crime. The primary focus, though, is on the two main sub-genres being written and read in South Africa today: the crime thriller novel and the literary detective novel. (For a more general account of the publishing history of South African crime fiction, see Elizabeth le Roux’s article in this issue, “South African Crime and Detective Fiction in English: A Bibliography and Publishing History”, which considers the role of publishers, not as intermediaries, but as central role-players in the process of producing and disseminating this literature.) Further, the survey is premised on the assertion that the form of crime fiction (simultaneously formulaic and protean), the content (simultaneously sensationalist and realist), and the often ambiguous ideological positioning, afford it a unique triadic capacity for interpretation: 1) socio-political analysis on the part of the author; 2) the ‘solving’ of a crime on the part of the detective or investigator; 3) the active engagement of the reader in both of these hermeneutic processes. The combined effect is that the literature, as it manifests in South Africa, constitutes an effective interpretive strategy for social analysis, as most scholars working in the field concur. Sabine Binder’s article, “Disentangling the Detective in Andrew Brown’s *Coldsleep Lullaby*”, explores how South African crime fiction is able to engage with the racial and gendered identity of the detective figure while serving also to demonstrate its ability to

assume historical dimensions. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology, Jessica Murray's article, "Reading Crime through a Gender Lens: Intersections of Shame, Women's Alcohol Consumption and Sexual Vulnerability in a Crime Novel by Sarah Lotz", comments on the capacity of crime fiction to represent social ills such as rape. This special issue also features the perspective of an author in the essay by Margie Orford, "The Grammar of Violence, Writing Crime as Fiction". Here Orford candidly explores her ethical unease with the representation of violence, in particular gender-based violence, through the crime fiction genre.

In what follows I trace the respective developments of the two sub-genres, the crime thriller novel and the literary detective novel.

The South African Crime Thriller Novel

The South African crime thriller novel is formulaic, fast-paced, plot-driven, contains more action than detection, is quite violent, and usually ends with a climactic chase or physical show-down. These generic elements position crime thriller novels squarely in the category of popular or low-brow literature, it would seem. A successful example of the genre is Meyer's *Devil's Peak* (2007), which in terms of subject matter covers corrupt policemen, drug cartels, prostitution and child abuse. The detective duo comprises of an alcoholic, Afrikaans policeman, Benny Griessel, and a former Umkhonto we Sizwe operative turned vigilante, Thobela Mpayipheli. There are three narrative strands, one for each investigator, and one for the prostitute, Christine van Rooyen, who succeeds in outsmarting both a Colombian drug smuggler and a corrupt policeman. The three strands are increasingly imbricated resulting in the climax of the novel being a bloody showdown between the two heroes and members of the Colombian drug cartel. The collateral damage is Benny's teenage daughter, Carla, who is gang-raped by the drug dealers before her father executes them, one by one, with the help of Thobela and not his gun, but his assegai. There is no mystery at the heart of this novel and certainly there is no traditional solving of the crime or resolution. At most, there is an intrepid tracking down of criminals, narrow escapes and, for the detectives, a dangerous survival.

Thrilling antecedents

Most South African crime thriller novels are strongly influenced by American hard-boiled crime fiction and its derivatives, and/or post-World War II espionage or *noir* thrillers. Hard-boiled

crime fiction developed in the early 1920s and was first published as short stories in cheap pulp magazines like *True Crime* or *Black Mask*. Authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler popularised short, urban-based fiction with a tough-guy protagonist, and reflected the raw social reality of American cities of the time. Barbara Stanners describes the period:

Socially it was a period marked by disillusionment, cynicism and social insecurity. Prohibition, economic and political instability had resulted in the growth of gangsterism, lawlessness and corruption. The crime fiction literary style, which peaked in the 1930s and 40s, mirrored this social malaise. (2007: 65)

Rather than solving a puzzle mainly by ratiocination, the hard-boiled protagonist embarks on an adventure or quest, relying on his wits and his physical prowess for survival in a hostile world. Traditionally, the hero is a lone investigator (a *Private Investigator*). The plots are complex with twists and turns as the hero plunges deeper and deeper into the dangerous, murky world of crime, creating tension and suspense. This mythic or archetypal journey often results in a world-weary cynicism as the protagonist temporarily loses his way and finds his moral compass compromised. This cynicism is reflected in the language of these stories – the dialogue is made up of “jargon of the streets, snappy wisecracks that are cliché-ridden and full of banter and sexual innuendo” (Stanners 2007: 66). The settings and milieu are bleak, sleazy and ugly. Run-down bars, depressing tenement blocks and general urban decay capture the climate of social disorder which is the thematic focus of this genre. Stanners notes that “[U]nlike earlier crime fiction, hard-boiled literature paints a disturbing picture of social psychosis and endemic corruption” (2007: 66), descriptions which could well be applied to the representations in crime fiction of post-apartheid South Africa.

The South African crime fiction novel also evokes an urban dystopia – a setting of menace and despair. The majority of novels are set in Cape Town. In this issue Claudia Drawe’s article, “Cape Town – City of Crime in South African Fiction”, addresses this topic and describes the ambiguity of urban spaces in South Africa. Drawe comments on how texts explore the paradox of Cape Town being a beautiful and relatively safe tourist destination whilst experiencing high levels of crime. In general, the badlands of the Cape Flats or the bleakness of the townships are contrasted with the spectacular natural beauty of the area, a beauty which is shown to be a veneer temporarily masking a cesspool of crime and corruption. Authors such as Mike Nicol, Margie Orford and Roger Smith describe gang warfare, prostitution rings, corruption at every level, human trafficking and, in general, a society so psychologically scarred

it is no wonder that detectives and investigators like Mace Bishop or Benny Griessel are cynical, jaded, damaged or disturbed. But a novel such as Meyer's *Devil's Peak* also contains elements of literary tourism. Where it differs most markedly from early hard-boiled fiction is in its attempts to represent the beauty of the South African landscape. The novel contains panoramic descriptions of the countryside: a car journey through the Karoo, redolent with local history and atmosphere (2007: 369-71). Priscilla Boshoff (in this issue) chooses to explore a very specific milieu, that of working-class black culture, in her article, "The Supernatural Detective: Witchcraft Crime Narratives in the *Daily Sun*". In this article she considers how tabloid news stories portray crimes related to witchcraft. She argues that these are neither objective news stories nor escapist crime thrillers, but a telling account of the tensions and contradictions of everyday life in this often bleak social landscape.

South African crime fiction is also influenced by post-World War II thriller, or *noir* fiction. In this genre we see the emergence of the suave, international man-of-mystery investigator hero, such as James Bond, and the more prosaic, less promiscuous but equally urbane George Smiley. These novels depict a world of political intrigue, increasing transnationalism, glamour, sex and global corruption, and they are characterised by action-packed, furiously paced plots. Most of the fiction written at this time reflects societies still haunted by World War II and which are now living with the insidious threats of the Cold War. Some of these generic or stylistic elements are apparent in South African texts. For example, Thobela Mpayipheli, the mythic hero of Meyer's *Devil's Peak*, is first introduced to the reader in Meyer's earlier novel, *Heart of the Hunter* (2003), a novel about domestic intelligence agencies and the CIA. Here we learn that the larger-than-life Thobela, nicknamed Tiny because of his Herculean stature, was trained by Soviets and East Germans during the Cold War and worked for a while as a KGB hitman. Certainly, Thobela's daredevil motorbike ride through the Karoo in *Heart of the Hunter* is on par with any of James Bond's implausible antics, and serves, rather sensationally, to establish him, within the novel, as a national hero.

In South African crime fiction hard-boiled conventions are apparent. A crime-fighter embarking on a case descends into a mythic underworld where distinguishing wrong from right, or foe from enemy, is the toughest challenge. With South Africa's history of violent oppression and an illegitimate government followed by civil unrest, the instability of transformation, and current levels of corruption, there is no moral certitude or social order to revert to. Crimes are

only partially solved and success is due to intuition and luck rather than to clever detection and the systematic gathering of clues. Like the Cold War thrillers, South African crime fiction constantly excavates the past. Characters, plots, even crimes have their origin in the struggle era. As mentioned, heroes turn out to be internationally trained freedom fighters who have returned from exile,⁶ or former SADF or SAP members with guilt-ridden histories and scores to settle.

Another antecedent of the South African crime thriller is the ‘police procedural’ sub-genre, which developed in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Police teams, the paraphernalia, and the process of the police investigation predominate and, as one reads in the daily press in real-life example, corruption in the law enforcement services is a major theme. In *Devil’s Peak* the activities of the Serious and Violent Crimes Unit, where Benny Griessel works, are described in some detail: for example, the ritual of the morning parade when cases are discussed and tasks assigned; or a web of political intrigue and media machinations that encroach on police work. In a telling scene, an MP, the chairman of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee of Justice and Political Development, visits the SVC unit because his proposal for a radical, new Sexual Offences Bill has placed him under media scrutiny. Using his political clout, he wants the police to help take the heat off him.

With detective teams, or duos, favoured in this sub-genre, the author is able to position a rare good cop detective *within* official structures, while his partner, often working in a related field but with more leeway for rule-breaking, is positioned liminally. There are many examples - Benny Griessel and Thobela Mpayipheli, Riedwaan Faizal and Clare Hart in Margie Orford’s novels, and David Patel and Jade de Jong in Jassy Mackenzie’s Johannesburg thrillers. For a detailed reading of Orford’s detective, Clare Hart, as a feminist detective figure, see Elizabeth Fletcher’s article, “Margie Orford’s *Daddy’s Girl* and the Possibilities of Feminist Crime Fiction”, in which Fletcher sketches the dynamic relationship between the more traditional hard-boiled character, Riedwaan Faizal, who is Coloured, and the subversive, sensitive, aptly named Hart, who is white. Moreover, with such inter-racial partnerships there is scope for the treatment of racial or cultural themes, ubiquitous of course in South African literature, and finding its parallel here in South African crime fiction. In Orford’s and Mackenzie’s texts there is further ‘genre-bending’ in that their detective duos are lovers. This not only harks back to the explicit sex of the *noir* thrillers, but at the same time touches on the conventions of romance fiction.

With criticism and theory in this field still in its infancy, the question of whether the crime thriller novel is an art form remains unanswered. Perhaps a starting point is to ask what, in the case of South African crime fiction, would be the criteria for artistic merit. Undoubtedly, the sub-genre is very popular, read widely, both locally and globally, and, in the case of Meyer, in English and Afrikaans. There are also a growing number of crime thriller novels being written in indigenous African languages, and local publishers, alert to the commercial success of big names like Meyer and Orford, have shown a willingness to back first-time authors. A demographic study of the readership of the South African crime thriller novel has yet to be undertaken, but going by observations in airport lounges, media attention, library shelves, book-club acquisitions and book stores, the readership is diverse.

The South African Literary Detective Novel

Unlike the crime thriller novel, the South African literary detective novel tends not to adhere to strict generic conventions even as it contains recognisable elements that may, or may not, be foregrounded: a puzzle or a mystery; a detective figure who sets out to solve the puzzle; psychological analysis; philosophical insights; realism; a sophisticated use of stylistic devices; complex characterisation; and an overall profundity or gravitas associated with what could be called serious or ‘highbrow’ literature. For Joel Black literary detective novels are characterised by “aesthetic sensibility, technical virtuosity, and authorial self-consciousness” (2010: 78) and critic Clive James describes the literary detective novel as containing “the art thrill and the thriller thrill at once” (qtd. in Black 2010: 77). Indeed, some overlap with the crime thriller novel is discernible. Meyer’s *Devil’s Peak* - a crime thriller novel - contains a puzzle, offers psychological analysis, is starkly realist, and, although plot-driven, characterisation is carefully and complexly rendered.

In most respects this description could also apply to Michiel Heyns’s *Lost Ground* (2011), which I would characterise as a literary detective novel. On closer inspection, though, a somewhat different narrative strategy emerges in Heyns’s novel, which is set in a small Karoo town. His is a narrative with multiple strands, the two most obvious being the story of Peter Jacobs, a white South African gay, investigative journalist, who return to his home-town of Alfredville after twenty years of voluntary exile in the UK; and the story of the murder of his cousin, Desirée Williams, who married a ‘Coloured’ policeman and whose murder has

heightened racial tensions in the town. Clearly and self-consciously, Heyns draws on classic detective fiction, in which a gifted detective sets out to solve a mystery, usually a crime of passion with motives buried in a labyrinth of past events and relationships. Equally and deliberately, Heyns subverts these traditional detective fiction elements in order to present the reader with a philosophical, psychological and political narrative about loss, identity, and betrayal in this self-reflexive, ironical novel. What is the specific literary tradition that Heyns deploys and subverts so deftly in this ‘post-apartheid’ novel?

Ratiocinative antecedents

The birth of the detective story is mainly attributed to two literary giants of the nineteenth century: Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. Poe’s three detective stories, or “ratiocinative tales”,⁸ as he called them, are set in Paris, feature the amateur sleuth Auguste Dupin, and are regarded as prototype detective stories with Dupin as the archetypal ingenious, eccentric detective. What Poe and then Doyle (with his Sherlock Holmes stories) later in the century established is a short fictional form which allows the reader to identify with the detective protagonist in his quest for ‘truth’, order, and justice. The reader is invited to accompany the detective on this quest and is even pitted against the detective in a bid to solve the mystery before the detective does, which the detective eventually does with aplomb and commendation from his sidekick, who is often also the narrator or chronicler of these adventures. This form gave the author an opportunity to show off the ingenuity of his or her detection skills while provoking the same skills in the reader. The intellectual, aesthetic and psychological satisfaction of this form has ensured its lasting success. Although a popular form to begin with, this sub-genre soon came to be regarded as ‘highbrow’ literature, mainly because of its celebration of the intellect, what Jacques Barzun describes as “the romance of reason” (qtd. in Winks 1980: 145). Other revered nineteenth-century authors like Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens either expanded the ratiocinative tale into full-length novels or incorporated aspects into complex realist fictional works. Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) and Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) are often cited as exemplars.

Heyns’s *Lost Ground* is a novel which seemingly celebrates the intellect and entices the reader to identify with its protagonist, Peter Jacobs. But where Dupin and Holmes were exemplary analysts whose powers of reason ensured their success in their quests for ‘truth’, order

and justice, Jacobs is a misguided, displaced, emotionally naive, investigator whose dubious motives for writing his story, along with his *ad hoc* detection methods, cause him falsely and fatally to interpret the clues. Although at one level *Lost Ground* purports to be a detective story, it is actually more a story about a dismal failure of a detective whose errors result in tragedy and the “horrific breakdown of reason” (2011: 294). Most readers of *Lost Ground* will question the accuracy of the protagonist’s powers of detection as they recognise red herrings, but they are otherwise persuaded to identify with his suffering – the sense of annihilation he feels at having so profoundly bungled the investigation:

And then the shell cracks, my time-hardened carapace, defence against feeling too much and showing too much, and I am left exposed on some desolate shore, delivered over to the furies that attend on human misfortune or misdeed. ... I feel the relentless pull of loss, of the losses I have caused and the losses I have suffered, the drift towards annihilation that nobody and nothing can stay. (2011: 297)

Although not a murderer but a detective figure, the protagonist, Peter (because of his model or ethical quandaries), resembles the criminal-as-artist figure of nineteenth-century crime fiction more than he does the logical Dupin or the rational Holmes.⁹ Despite its protracted portrayal of the tragic consequences of crime, the nineteenth-century crime novel often offered some hope of redemption. In the case of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, for example, it is suggested that his redemption is possible through religion or Sonia’s love for him. In *Lost Ground*, the young black woman who befriends Peter, Nonyameko Mhlabeni, plays the role of sidekick. As Watson does with Holmes, she questions Peter’s methods and pricks his conscience and, at the close of the novel, she comes to symbolise the possibility of redemption: “But I hold onto Nonyameko’s hand, for all the world as if I could thus anchor myself to some saving vestige of identity, as if her grasp could keep me from being swept away into oblivion” (297).

With the ratiocinative tale Poe and Doyle were able to show off their own intellectual and creative virtuosity through their respective detective’s analytical prowess. In *Lost Ground* Heyns accomplishes a similar celebration of the intellect by precisely the opposite means. By creating an anti-detective protagonist, who also loses faith in his ability to write a story, Heyns is able to display not only his ability to create a murder-mystery story, but also his ability, ironically, to undercut his own writing endeavours. Through various self-reflexive strategies, such as intertextual references, Heyns adds dimensions of literariness to his narrative. We have, in

illustration, the cliché of “the curious incident of the dog in the night-time”, derived from Doyle’s “The Adventure of Silver Blaze” (1893) and complicated here by there being two dogs, one belonging to the victim and one belonging to the murderer (2011: 109). There are further allusions to detective fiction – “I’m not here to write a whodunit” (2011: 110), “No shit, Sherlock, and you know better?” (2011: 270) - which serve deliberately to subvert the classic detective story.

In the first half of the twentieth century, after the trauma of World War I, the British whodunit became a favourite amongst genteel readers. Given prominence by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L Sayers, among others, these novels were usually set in a village, or what is now a cliché, the country-manor setting. *Lost Ground* is set in a small Karoo town¹⁰ and Heyns offers the reader a cast of colourful local characters, or suspects, who form a community with a shared, albeit disturbing, past. Besides its nod to the cosy whodunit, the setting of *Lost Ground* serves as a microcosm of South African society, a veritable hotbed of racial, political and sexual tensions which erupt in the violent act of murder, not once but twice. Desirée Williams is not the only murder victim. Vincent, an advocate from the DRC, now a car-guard in Alfredville, is the victim of a xenophobic murder. Heyns also successfully evokes the mood of the setting, an intrinsic element of the whodunit. He replaces, quite deliberately, the charms of the English countryside with the desolate beauty of the Karoo:

I spit on the ground and run on. Just beyond the school the tarred road turns into a dirt track leading to farmland. The landscape is starting to shimmer in the heat, the sheep clustering under the few trees for shade. It’s a stony landscape, making few concessions to conventional ideas of beauty: some hills, shading off into distant mountains, a riverbed almost dry at this time of year; the great blue bowl of sky already blanching under the rising sun. ... Now, running through the empty morning, I feel a certain appeal in the very emptiness, something melancholy in its meagreness and yet comforting in its permanence. ... It’s not a landscape that conforms readily to a formula: *it refuses to be reduced to a cliché* or even meaning. ... Could I return to its stony comfort? (my emphasis; 2011: 62)

With this valorisation of setting, Heyns points not only to the clichés of the whodunit genre, but also to one of the major themes of the novel - that of loss. Peter has lost the ground he spits and runs on, the ground he has forsaken for the anodyne existence he has in London. Peter returns to Alfredville in order to confront that loss and suffer more.

As in the ratiocinative tale or the whodunit, the detective embodies moral authority and eventually restores order when the puzzle is solved and the murderer arrested. The reader thus enjoys the escapist fantasy which Auden described in his aptly titled essay, “The Guilty

Vicarage". The whodunit narrative is as much about the crime as it is about the solving of the crime. The denouement takes the form of the detective recreating the story of the crime *and* the ratiocinative process before the principal characters who gather for the revelation scene. In *Lost Ground*, Peter is reluctant to take up an ethical position or even an overt investigative stance. He arrives in Alfredville with the vague and unrealistic intention of finding out "what the facts mean, what they tell us about the possibilities or impossibilities of a non-racial South Africa" (2011: 103). It is only when he is charged by various characters to put the information which he has gathered to good use that he assumes a moral responsibility and actually involves himself in the lives of others. For a while in the narrative Peter takes on the stature of a hard-boiled detective hero, what Raymond Chandler described as "the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world" (qtd. in Black 2010: 83). For a tantalising moment the reader believes that Peter will fulfil his potential as a "good man" (2011: 231), an epithet conferred on him by a range of characters he encounters in Alfredville.

Ironically, however, Peter does not solve the mystery or behave honourably, although he does try to uncover the "underlying truth" (150) and uphold justice. His detective exploits lead to disorder and tragedy, the murderer goes free, and for the reader there is no satisfactory denouement. Instead there is a false revelation scene, in which Peter accuses his childhood friend of murder. Then there is another revelation scene, in which Chrisna - the wife of his childhood friend - admits to the murder of Desirée but heaps moral guilt upon Peter for interfering in their lives. Significantly, there is no escapism for the reader, as the conclusion of the novel is a parody of the traditional denouement. Peter recounts not his skills of detection, but his "sorry tale of a stuff-up" (294). This forces the reader to recognise that the story of the murder in the sleepy Karoo town is actually the story of Peter's irrevocable loss, as well as the story of South Africa's unrelenting crimes against itself.

To some readers *Lost Ground* may well read as a highly unsatisfying detective story. After all, Heyns has littered the narrative with *literary* red herrings in the form of easily recognisable conventions of the genre: a murder mystery or puzzle, the gradual unveiling of clues, the build-up of suspense, a crime of passion with the usual motives of jealousy and desire, the reconstruction of past events, stake-outs, a line-up of suspects, interviews, theory testing with a sidekick, and false clues. What to make of this carefully structured confounding of the readers' expectations? Perhaps the answer lies in Peter's obsession with stories and the author's

obsession with irony. At the end, Peter survives his ordeal by acknowledging the redemption offered by irony:

The thin line, I tell myself is irony. Cling to it like Theseus clinging to Ariadne's clue in the labyrinth of the Minotaur, conscious of the terrible fate that awaits you if you let go. So I recount the events of the morning as I imagine Joseph Conrad would have told it, or Henry James, the horror kept in abeyance by the effort of lucid narration. ... I cling to the thin line of irony, and methodically plot a course through the labyrinth of my story, steering clear of the monsters of the mind. (2011: 294)

If, as this passage suggests, the irony of narration is what enables Peter's to survive his own distress, then Heyns's ultimate aim in this literary detective novel is to show that although the 'detective' may fail to solve the particular crime, his narrating consciousness helps him solve the 'crime' of his selfish detachment. This value, coupled with the hope of redemption as symbolised by Nonyameko in the closing scene, points to *Lost Ground* being not too dissimilar, in terms of deep thematic preoccupations, to the ratiocinative tale or the whodunit. These forms, by analogy, are also narrative projections of our shared fear of contingency and inevitable loss, and our desire for order, justice, and 'truth'.

Heyns is not alone in using detective fiction to ask ontological questions in post-apartheid South Africa. In work which is beyond the scope of this survey, I have completed similar readings of Andrew Brown's *Coldsleep Lullaby* (2005) and *Solace* (2012), Ingrid Winterbach's *The Book of Happenstance* (2008) and Meyer's oeuvre in general. A common thread is that, in the difficult socio-political and cultural context of South Africa, authors of crime fiction have come to recognise that solving the crime neatly does not solve the problem of crime, or indeed the problem of living a just life. The feats of logic epitomised by Dupin and Holmes - using deduction and induction to identify the criminal - do not necessarily address the socio-economic causes of crime. Neither do the traditional whodunits confront national crises or questions of individual moral responsibility within crime-infested society. With Heyns's subversive use of detective fiction, a post-apartheid anti-detective figure is born. Together with figures from other South African crime thrillers, such as Eberard Februarie and Helena Verbloem, Peter asks questions not only about a specific crime, but about crime in general, and about contemporary South African society and its many challenges. These anti-detectives demonstrate the limitations of detection based on the laws of reason and the need for an alternative hermeneutics in a crime-ridden country.

Conclusion

The aim of this survey was to historicise and provide a literary genealogy for South African crime fiction. To do so, I have also provided a brief overview of scholarship in the field. What I have not managed to do here is examine more recent developments such as the growing reputation of Scandinavian crime fiction or the diversification evident in postcolonial crime fiction, for example, in India, Australia and elsewhere in Africa, which no doubt exerts an influence on South African crime fiction. The intention with this special issue was to develop criticism and spur debate about South African crime fiction and its sub-genres, and in particular, to assess their capacity for social analysis. Consequently, the articles in this special issue fulfil these objectives and open the way for further investigation.

Acknowledgement

A review of these two sub-genres and of the exemplars used here (*Devil's Peak* and *Lost Ground*) is also to be found in my article, "Fears and Desires in South African Crime Fiction." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39 (3), 2013: [Forthcoming].

Notes

1. See Stephen Knight's seminal work, *Form and Ideology* (1980).
2. Primorac has also published articles and book chapters on Southern African crime fiction.
3. "Crime Beat: A Final Column for FMR," *Crime Beat @ Books Live*, (January 2013), available at <http://crimebeat.bookslive.co.za/blog/> retrieved on 16 January 2013.
4. Haycraft's anthology includes contributions by Chesterton, Sayers, Freeman, Ogden Nash and covers topics still being contested today.
5. See *SlipNet* (Stellenbosch Literary Project). This website, maintained by the Department of English, Stellenbosch University, has been the site of the most in-depth and cutting-edge debates about South African crime fiction in the past three years. Available at <http://SlipNet.co.za/?s=genre+snob+debate>.
6. cf. Mace Bishop and Pylon Buso in Mike Nicol's 'Revenge' Trilogy.
7. The chronology of the novel is complex: set in the present, the main action occurs over an eleven-day period in January 2010, but through analepsis the narrative covers the 1980s when Peter and

Bennie were boys, and the 1990s when Peter was absent and the events leading to the murder transpired. As always national history forms a backdrop.

8. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841); “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842); and “The Purloined Letter” (1844).
9. Though Peter Jacobs does resemble Dupin and Holmes in that he is socially isolated and emotionally detached, which seems to be his tragic flaw.
10. See Drawe’s article, which examines the specifically urban setting of South Africa’s crime thriller novels.

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