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Investigating the New South Africa: An Interview with Deon Meyer on *Dead Before Dying*

Deon Meyer is a highly successful South African novelist and short story writer, whose work, originally written in Afrikaans, has been translated into English and many other languages.

Dead Before Dying (1999) was the first of his novels to appear in English. The original edition, *Feniks*, came out in 1996, two years after Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa.¹ The author uses the voices of his four main characters to paint a picture of the 'New' South African society. Each feels differently towards the new post-apartheid regime and brings a particular outlook based on his or her background and experience. What all four have in common is their attempt to forget the past, start a new life and negotiate a new identity.

¹ Deon Meyer, *Dead Before Dying*, trans. by Madeleine van Biljon (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999); *Feniks* (Cape Town: Queillerie, 1996).

The hero of the novel is detective Mat Joubert, engaged in investigating a series of apparently unrelated murders. At the start of the novel, shattered by the death of his wife Lara, who was also a police officer, Joubert is still mired in depression, although two years have already passed. A breakthrough becomes possible only with the arrival of Colonel Bart de Wit, on New Year's Day, 1996.

Appointed by the new black minister of law and order to the Murder and Robbery division of the Cape Town police force, de Wit introduces health tests to ensure the medical and psychological well-being of his officers. Joubert is forced into having weekly meetings with a psychologist, Hanna Nortier. After several of these encounters, discussing matters like Lara's death and his arduous relationship with his father, a racist policeman who grossly mistreated black or coloured criminals and colleagues alike, he is able to weep for the first time in 17 years. Joubert's progress can be compared allegorically to South Africa's new era and the objectives and effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which began its hearings in April 1996.

Another viewpoint is that of de Wit himself, a former member of the ANC, who tries to impress his new colleagues by recounting his experience, including training at Scotland Yard during his years of exile. Yet his account triggers uncertainty among the majority of his colleagues and he has difficulty in establishing a role in the New South Africa.

The third of the protagonists is Police Lieutenant Leon Petersen, one of the few coloured men of the Murder and Robbery squad. Still disrespected by many of the whites he has to deal with on a daily basis, he too has trouble adjusting to the New South Africa. Reclassified as black – "Not coloured any more, not Cape Malay or brown, but black" –, he is expected to "spark", yet neither he, nor any of the other members of the squad, white, black or brown, see any improvement

All the troubles, all the murders and deaths and rapes, all the long hours with fuckers shooting at you and rich whiteys who act as if you're not there and your boss who says your must spark and the union which says don't worry, things will be fine, and a wife who says she wants to leave you...²

² *Dead Before Dying*, 276.

Finally, another viewpoint is provided by the psychologist, Hanna Nortier, whose life can be seen as an allegory for the old South Africa evolving into the new. As eventually appears, Hanna (formerly Hester Clarke) is a rape victim. The night Hester Clarke 'died', Hanna Nortier was 'born', emerging from the horror much as the New South Africa was emerging from the hateful years of apartheid. Unable to recognize her sullied body as her own, she decides to change her name and start a new life. Yet her reactions to the new deadly obstacle of HIV that she is now forced to confront prove to be behind the mystery Joubert is engaged in investigating.

AR-T: *Why did you decide to use detective conventions as the literary framework for your novels?*

DM: This is a question that people often ask me... I never really decided to write in the crime or thriller genre, I just wanted to tell stories and I think instinctively every author has a certain issue or a certain genre that they're sort of put in, in terms of the stories that they tell.

I only wanted to tell crime stories and I think I was greatly influenced by other crime fiction I read when I was a teenager; maybe that was just where I naturally fit in. I still don't think of myself as specifically a crime author or a thriller writer. I think of myself as a storyteller and it's for the publishers and the media and the academics to decide where, in which niche, I should be put in, so it was never a conscious decision. I love crime and I love thrillers.

Have you ever read Ed McBain's work? He's an American author, a New Yorker, who passed away in 2005. He had a huge influence on my own reading tastes and my own writing and he was probably the best crime author ever. He also wrote under his real name of Evan Hunter, he won a few Pulitzer Prizes for that. You know, it's very difficult to say but I think I was influenced by people like him and John D. McDonald but I never made a decision I wanted to write crime fiction.

AR-T: *After reading "Dead Before Dying", however, one realizes that you did some research in order to write this novel. The portrayal of the detective and his work with the police department is outstanding.*

DM: When I wrote this particular book, it was my first real crime novel. My first novel was called "He who plays with fire" in Afrikaans but it was never translated.³ I don't think it was ever good enough for the international market. I often say that a first novel is like having a brother in jail. You can't deny it but you don't want to talk about it!

My first book was not really a crime novel, it was more of a thriller. So when I wanted to write... well, it's a long story about how this book came about...

³ *Wie met vuur speel* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1994).

I had a totally different story in mind for *Dead Before Dying* and eventually Mat Joubert as a character just took over the story, and he decided what went into the novel. He made a lot of things happen in the book. But when I realized I needed a policeman for this specific character I went to what was then called the Murder and Robbery squad in Cape Town. It's the homicide squad I think they have in America – I know in New York and LA they have the homicide squad within different precincts. In Cape Town it used to be that way, but now we follow the British structure of policing; back then there was the murder and robbery squad.

I contacted the police and I asked if I could spend some time with the detectives. And I spent two weeks working with them as a work-shadow...

It was an eye opener. The one thing that impressed me most about this research was the influence of the work on the people...

This was in 1994. SA was going through a big transition. There was a lot of violence and crime at that time – a lot of it was politically motivated and a lot of it was simply because of the huge changes in SA. There was a big feeling of instability and these people were working with these violent crimes all the time. And it had an influence. Some of those cops drank, some of them got depressed. Some of them were alcoholics, some of them were divorced, because they just couldn't cope with working with such violence and such crime, often bloody crimes, and still go home and be among their families. Depression is Mat Joubert's way of coping, it's his way of absorbing it.

So that was the first thing that made a big impression on me, in addition to the way that they looked at crime, the way they investigated. It was a real eye-opener for me and I have a lot of respect for the police nowadays. They are not paid a lot of money but they work so hard, they are so dedicated; and they work with the scum of the earth often. I actually went with them to murder scenes and after the second one I said "no more". To work with that sort of thing everyday must have an influence on your psyche.

That's the thing that fascinates me about writing crime, to try to portray this world and to try and show what influence it has on the people themselves.

AR-T: Were you influenced by anyone you saw in particular or is your novel just an outcome of your imagination?

DM: I had the character of Mat Joubert created before I went to the police. But the whole subject of depression was something that I included later. During that time there were some political motivated crimes. Car tires would be put around the necks of people who were thought to be traitors, petrol poured onto them and lighted up. There were really terrible crimes and depression among cops was common, so the depression in Mat Joubert comes from there.

Then there's another character, Benny Griessel, who is based on one of the other detectives I met, but only in terms of how he looks.

The police have changed a lot. I did that research in 1994, and there have been so many changes in SA, within the police as well, and I'm happy to say that those

sort of violent crimes are not taking place anymore. We still have murders but we don't have that kind of politically motivated killing anymore.

AR-T: *That is something you actually refer to in "Dead Before Dying". When the detectives are investigating, they often ask the question: was the victim involved in any political party?*

DM: The reason for that is the bullet that they found in one of the victims, it seemed to them that the caliber was for a Tokarev pistol, which is a Russian-made pistol, which was used before 1994. There were basically two political movements that were banned: the ANC that is today our government, and the other is the PAC (the Pan-African Congress) and the PAC had a military arm and they used a lot of Russian weapons like the Tokarev; that is why these questions are being asked every time because when the cops hear Tokarev they immediately think about the military arm of the PAC.

I wouldn't have been able to write the same novel today because the PAC has virtually disappeared – if they found a Tokarev pistol now they would probably think it was the Russian mafia.

AR-T: *I was shocked that Hester was the murderer. Were there any clues that I missed?*

DM: I tried to show that she wasn't all that stable. As I said it was my first crime novel and it was one of the things that I really worried about – do you plot red herrings? You don't want to make the reader feel cheated; and I'm not sure I did it right. No, there weren't any clues... yes, it was a shock. I knew who the murderer was going to be...

Basically it's all about the point of view. You basically have three possible points of view for a novel:

The first person narrator. You can only show the reader what that narrator is seeing or listening, thinking, feeling.

The third person narrator. I had a literature professor that used to say that the third person narrator is like a video camera. The camera is behind the eyes of the narrator, the camera is on the shoulder of every character you use.

The third person omniscient narrator has the video camera up in the sky. He sees everything. He can comment on everybody. Normally, this narrator has a style, a specific way of looking at people.

With *Dead Before Dying*, it was third person narrative but the video camera was very much on the shoulder of Mat Joubert. There was not a lot of variation. I had to give the reader what Mat Joubert knew but at the same time, the reader also knows more than the detective. There are different ways of doing this.

AR-T: *Does Mat Joubert appear again in any novel?*

DM: He actually appears in the book that I am writing right now, *Spoor*. He is happily married.

AR-T: *To Margaret?*

DM: Yeah, to her. (Laughs)

I do refer to him in other books; In *Dead at Daybreak*, he comes in and tells his colleagues he is getting married. And in *Devil's Peak* he makes a little bit of an appearance.⁴

⁴ Deon Meyer, *Dead at Daybreak* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000); *Devil's Peak*, (F Howes, c2007; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007).

The problem with the characters, and I often say this, is that when you read a book you spend maybe three or four days with a character, maybe more. You grow fond of them. When you finish the book, you wonder what would have happened to him or her.

When you write a book, you spend a year or two years with these characters. And I don't think our subconscious can discern between real people and fictitious people. I grow so fond of them, so close to these characters than when I finish the book I often wonder how these characters are and I worry about them. I often make up stories about how they are doing and those stories become part of the next novels.

AR-T: *That's something that happens with other authors' novels. Good examples are Michael Connelly or Walter Mosley.*

DM: That's right. In my case, Benny Griessel has now become a central character.

I loved writing about him in *Dead Before Dying* because he seemed to be a catalyst. Every time he came into a scene he made things happen, whether he walked in at the wrong time... or was in charge of an investigation, so I always knew that I would write about him again. He was in *Devil's Peak* again, and in *Thirteen Hours*,⁵ and I'll probably do another novel about him as well. He's a really nice character.

⁵ Deon Meyer, *Thirteen Hours*, trans. by K. L. Seeger (London: Hodder, 2010).

AR-T: *You said that back in 1994 when you wrote this novel there was a period of transition going on. Did you try to portray that transition through Mat Joubert himself? Because he went through a major transition in the book.*

DM: The police department is probably the one state department that has experienced the most upheaval and change, and it is also a much politicized thing in South Africa. The detectives I worked with were not only forced to cope with these working conditions and all these crimes but they were also going through a changing environment where suddenly politically everything was changing in the police department and outside.

Keep in mind when you write crime fiction, you are looking for sources of conflict all the time because you can't have conflict without suspense. Conflict is the mother of suspense. So when you create a character and you create a story around him, you want to give him as many conflicts as possible. Because that's what people like to read. If everything is easy and the character cruises through the story, then there is no story. So I just give all the troubles I can to Mat Joubert.

AR-T: *Is that why you also include the character of the “sweetheart robber”?*

DM: Exactly!

The political environment was a very practical thing; I never write with the intention of giving the reader a snap shot of South Africa, at a specific time, or make social comments or political comments.

My only job is to write an entertaining story but if it happens in a specific setting I will use as many things from that setting that I can if it adds to the suspense, if it adds to the conflict between the protagonist and his world.

AR-T: *With so many political motives available, why did you use one as personal as Hannab’s?*

DM: I didn’t want to write a political novel or I didn’t want to write about political crime or political issues back then. I thought I owed it to my country not to do that.

And I think, if you look at most crime fiction over the world, most of the crimes are personal. Those are the interesting crimes, the ones that the reader identifies with better.

If it is political it can be muggy. If it is personal, it is more captivating.

AR-T: *What about Mat Joubert’s views? He condemns his father’s racism. Does Mat Joubert represent a new generation in South Africa?*

DM: Yes, he does. Mat Joubert is more or less my generation and I think we are the generation (I’m talking about whites) with the most anger about apartheid. Because we were the first generation to be born in apartheid and to grow up in that environment, and we were lied to by everybody.

It is very difficult to explain to someone who has never been in those circumstances but everybody – our school teachers, our principals, our priests, our government – everybody was creating this impression that it was okay to have apartheid. The priests made us think that apartheid was based in solid Biblical principles.

Every time that there was something negative said about apartheid in the United Nations, the media would not publish it, so we lived in this world of propaganda and make-believe where there were very few truths, and we had to find the truths by ourselves. And it was often a painful process.

You get to the point where you realize that something is really wrong here. So I tried to put some of that anger in Mat Joubert.

My late father was a wonderful man but he came from a specific point of view, and I remember having these huge arguments with him about apartheid, but he believed it was right. I think it is understandable if you look at his generation and what they went through. But there was a lot of anger within us and some of it went into the book.

AR-T: *Have you developed that at all in your books?*

DM: In the next book after *Dead Before Dying*, *Dead at Daybreak*, I think I do. It is the story of the protagonist and how he comes to realize within that system of apartheid that it was really bad. But one must be careful...If you want to preach, you become a priest. If you want to entertain you become a writer.

I don't want to make any statement with my books. What I want to do is to use as much of the texture and the background and the setting as I can to make the characters and the story interesting.

But I think that the moment you start thinking you want to make this point, or you want to have this agenda, in terms of writing, in my genre, you're going to be in big trouble.

You can't put a protagonist into Cape Town and not portray an accurate setting around them. We all interact with our world in so many ways and on so many levels, so that happens almost by chance. And this provides the reader with a lot of background about South Africa and being South African, but it's never done on purpose, it's just part of the story telling process.

AR-T: *But you are criticizing apartheid somehow between the lines.*

DM: Yeah, but again, it is not deliberate. I create a character and I try to understand what forms this character and how he looks at the world.

I can never give my perspective. It must be the character's perspective.

⁶ *Blood Safari* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

My latest novel that was translated, *Blood Safari*,⁶ has a bodyguard as the protagonist and he hates rich Afrikaners and I understand that because I also view them with a lot of distrust and worry, but he really hates them, so there's always a difference between my own point of view and my characters'.

When I create a character, I try and make up a back-story, just in my head, I don't write anything down, but I create at least in my mind the character's background, his family, the big influences on his life, etc. I need to know how he became the way that he is. That will determine the lens through which he looks at the world.

AR-T: *There is a question on Hannah and her interest in Mat Joubert – was she actually interested in Mat or was she involved with him only because of the investigation?*

DM: She was only close to him because of the investigation. I think she had experienced so much damage, psychologically. I don't think she would ever have been able to have a normal relationship. The biggest problem with having a female murderer is that the motivation must be very very strong. That's why the end is fairly shocking, because all the cases studies tell us and all the psychology tells us that women don't kill and rarely do it with guns.

If they do kill, they hire someone or do it by poisoning them, or that sort of thing. So I had to make the motivation very strong. And yes, she was only with Mat

Joubert because she wanted to stay close. Once she realized he was investigating the case, she wanted to be close to him.

AR-T: *Rape and sexual assault are part of the problematic issues in South Africa. Did you want to represent that in the novel?*

DM: I want to say something about crime in South Africa at the moment and in the last ten years. We often get a wrong perception in the media. You hear about South Africa being a crime-ridden, dangerous country. And it's not. The problem is that we have a democracy and a very transparent society. We are a third world country now evolving towards a first world country. So South Africa is a dynamic country in transition. Like other South American countries, like a lot of Far Eastern countries, like India and Pakistan.

The other problem is that we have a good deal of abject poverty, and then a small percentage of people who are very, very rich. That's a combination that makes it very difficult in terms of crime. Crime is often a socio-economic phenomenon, especially where you have such a huge gap between the haves and the have-nots.

I want to say that we publish our crime statistics openly and internationally. A lot of other countries are in a similar socioeconomic space but don't publish their crime statistics. Mexico is a great example. I think Mexico is the equivalent of SA in those terms. It is also a third world country rapidly moving into a first world country, with strong economic growth and these differences between rich and poor.

But you never see the full picture of Mexican crime statistics.

I am making a case here that South Africa is not so bad as many people think. We are not a first world country and the problem is that South Africa is compared to European countries, to stable communities where there is no real poverty. And those that are really poor comprise only small and isolated little groups.

I think 95% of the crime in South Africa happens in really poverty-stricken, township areas.

And they are almost always social economic crimes: crimes within the family, crimes within a very small community. And the crimes against women are similar. Again, during the apartheid regime only the crime statistics of the white community were published, but now we are an open society, a democratic country where we are publishing all the crime statistics. Again, if you compare South Africa with other countries in a similar social economic space, the situation is not as bad.

When they started publishing crime statistics for all communities in South Africa, one of the figures that was really frightening was rape. Again, compared with countries with similar socioeconomic space the rate is not as high, but there is too much. A lot of it has to do with alcoholism, people are getting drunk and committing these crimes...

The statistics in the past 12 months show that rape and other crimes against women are coming down.

AR-T: *Where is the influence of the media on these issues?*

DM: Crime has become a political tool.

The government should do more about crime but the government is doing a lot already. There was an article on the newspaper recently on how South Africa police is being helped by Scotland yard...

⁷ Michael Connelly, *The Lincoln Lawyer* (London: Orion, 2005).

But crime happens everywhere. Michael Connelly is an American writer that writes novels set in LA. *The Lincoln Lawyer* is his latest novel.⁷ We were talking about crime statistics in Los Angeles, and I thought to myself, thank goodness I don't live in L.A.

Crime is a relative thing – if you live in one of the townships you are more likely to see crime.

It is a political thing in South Africa. Whenever there is a crime, all the opposition parties blame the government and I don't agree with that.

AR-T: *You worked as a journalist for a period of time. Can you see the influence of it in this particular novel?*

DM: When I worked with the police I saw the pressure that is put on these guys. First of all, you have the internal pressure. The head of the unit wants to have more crimes solved, so he's putting pressure on his people. Then, the public puts pressure on them. And of course the media does too. They love a good crime story.

So it is this really bad cycle and I am fascinated by the whole process.

AR-T: *I'm curious, how long does it take you to write a book?*

DM: When I wrote this book, I was still working part time. I would get up early in the morning to write and then it took me two years.

⁸ *Spoor* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2010); the novel is now forthcoming in English as *Trackers* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011).

Now, I am writing full time, since the beginning of 2008. This is the first book that I'll have completed while writing full time. The book that I'm working on right now, *Spoor*,⁸ is a bit longer than the rest, but it's going to take me 10 months. I would say now it should take me about a year.

I've already started thinking about my next book too. The other day I actually started writing the first chapter. The thinking phase can take up to 3 or 4 months. Then I must start doing the research which can take another two months. So I would say 12 months average for a novel.

AR-T: *Do you write your books in Afrikaans, and then when they are translated into English, do you go back and read them again?*

DM: I am very fortunate, I have a very good translator but when she's done, she sends the manuscript to me and I often spend two months working on it, and really making sure that everything is how I like it. Because however good she is,

she can't always know what my intention was or how I want to phrase it, and it's not that she did something wrong, it's just that I want to say it in a different way.

I think for writers, words have much more meaning than for non writers. These are the tools that you work with. I know people that work with wood and they have their own favorite cabinets and knives. I also have my favorite words and phrases. A particular way to structure paragraphs and sentences.

And for my translator it's hard to know all this.

The other reason for me is to make sure that nothing or as little as possible is lost in the translation. Because the English translation is the one that is used for the translation into French, Italian, Spanish, etc.

AR-T: *If the translation cannot be perfect, is there anything in this book that got lost in translation?*

DM: The only thing that ever gets lost in my books is the Afrikaans spoken in what we call the Cape Flats. In South Africa we have lots of different cultural groups: we have the black indigenous, the Zulu, the Xhosa. Then, you have the whites, and the people of mixed race, in South Africa we use the term "coloured" people. It is a perfectly fine term to use and in the translation, sometimes it is difficult to make it clear for the readers to understand that.

The point that I want to make is that the coloured people of the Cape Flats speak a version of the Afrikaans that is to my mind the most beautiful version of Afrikaans. It's a very musical, and lyrical, and humorous, it's a wonderful... perhaps not quite a dialect, but almost a dialect of Afrikaans. And I have a lot of friends that speak coloured Afrikaans and I just love it. And I use a lot of that in my books and you can't translate that. It's impossible to translate that.

AR-T: *There is also a black detective. His name is Leo Peterson.*

DM: He is actually a coloured detective.

AR-T: *Have you ever thought about writing a novel from the point of view of this character? There is no doubt that his perspective would be very different from Mat Joubert's.*

DM: In my novel *Heart of Hunter*,⁹ I had a black Xhosa protagonist, and that was an incredible experience for me: to create a Xhosa and to try to see the world through his eyes.

When I wrote *Dead Before Dying*, there were no black detectives in the Murder and Robbery squad. This was in 1994 and there was still segregation, everything didn't change overnight, so it wouldn't have been credible for me to use a coloured or black protagonist.

Heart of Hunter is not a crime novel, it's much more of a thriller... The story is about this freedom fighter... And he is now in the New South Africa and he has training as a soldier and as an assassin. he can't find work... He has to find information...

⁹ *Heart of Hunter*, (Stoughton, 2003).

AR-T: *Going back to “Dead Before Dying” can you talk about the psychic that you used. Why was she included in the novel?*

DM: When I was writing a book I read a case about psychics assisting the police, I think in the UK. I thought this is something cool to bring in. I did it because I thought it would add to the fun of the book. As you probably know, today there are tv shows that have psychics helping the police...

AR-T: *Are there more women now in police departments?*

DM: Yes, there are. Also, a lot of female detectives, I'm very happy to report. They seem to cope a lot better with stress. Also, it's better to have women detectives when working with crimes related to women.

I think the government is trying to have some gender equality in all the state departments in South Africa.

AR-T: *Have you ever thought about having a main character who is a female detective?*

DM: Yes, I have. I created a character. Her name is Mbali, that means flower in Zulu. She is one of the protagonists in the novel *Thirteen Hours* and she is going to be in the next novel too.

AR-T: *Are any of your characters or your stories based on people you know?*

DM: No, no. People email me and say: I have a great story that you have to write. But no, I don't use those. It's much more fun to create the characters and the story from the scratch. To me, the fun of writing is creating those things.