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Present Tense : crime fiction in postapartheid South Africa

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Present Tense: Crime Fiction in Postapartheid South Africa

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Abstract

Since 1994, when South Africa transitioned from apartheid to majority rule, its locally written crime fiction has become a literary force. Although some critics initially dismissed the genre as superficial and clichéd, most now agree it offers important social, political and ethical insights, providing an arena in which shared issues may be theorised and thought through. These include, for example, the implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the loss of faith in governance and the rule of law, issues surrounding race and whiteness, and South Africa's emergence out of isolation and into the larger world. Less well considered, however, is how crime fiction achieves those ends, and that is the focus of this thesis. It argues that the genre's hermeneutic conventions, far from being reductive, are powerful tools for conveying social insight because these conventions, when adapted by writers or affected by context, change from text to text, and readers use these intertextual differences to interpret meaning. Together with the genre's concentration on the collective, on morality, and on law and order, such engagement with the conventions helps readers decipher and in some cases find positive proposals for managing the country's recovery narrative. After locating South African crime fiction historically and critically, I present my argument firstly through a close critical examination of novels by two South African crime writers, Andrew Brown and Mike Nicol, and then creatively, through my own crime novel, *Present Tense*. In contrast to Brown, who exaggerates features of the conventional police detective in order to highlight aspects of identity and belonging in present day South Africa, Nicol subverts most of the conventions of the thriller to offer a searing and pessimistic critique of South African society. *Present Tense*, a police procedural, adapts conventions relating to the setting, protagonist and narrative resolution in order to address the present-day consequences of apartheid, notions of trust and betrayal, and the dislocation felt by white citizens in the new social order. Thus, paradoxically, the seemingly inflexible conventions of crime fiction enable nuanced comment on social issues at a particular place and time; and this ability ensures the genre's relevance and importance to a post-traumatic, postcolonial society like South Africa. ACCESS TO THE NOVEL, PRESENT TENSE, IS RESTRICTED.

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First, an overview of South African crime fiction in the last 20 years is presented. Then the essay presents an argument for South African crime fiction to be regarded as the 'new political novel', based on its capacity for socio-political analysis. After a virtual absence from South African writing under apartheid, there has been an explosion of crime fiction in post-apartheid South Africa, largely within the various thriller sub-genres. This article examines Deon Meyer's *Heart of the hunter* (2003). The explosion of crime fiction in contemporary South Africa requires explanation in terms of its relations with actual crime in that country, with crime novels from elsewhere, and with trends in South African literary history. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Article. Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: transforming under fire by MARK SHAW London: Hurst, 2002. Pp. 169. ELIZABETH STANLEY (a1). One of the more energetic debates about postapartheid South African literature revolves around the question of why genre fiction, and more particularly crime fiction, so heavily saturates the book market. This debate has often been conducted anecdotally or superficially in reviews and comments on literary websites, despite scattered journal articles and one or two special issues on the topic.¹ Particularly contested has been my own suggestion that crime thrillers may have come to stand in for what used to be seen as political or engaged fiction, in response to which some academics. 3 Freedom on a frontier? The double bind of (white) postapartheid South African literature. (pp. 57-85). DOI: 10.18772/12016099643.6.