

Bad Company, compiled and edited by Joanne Hichens (Macmillan) R195.95
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It is by now a commonplace that South Africa is experiencing a flowering (if that is the word) of crime fiction. The reason is not hard to find: just as the middle-class nineteenth-century novel concentrated on marriage and property because that was on people's minds, the twenty-first century South African novel concentrates on crime because that's what's on people's minds. What's in the books is what's on the streets.

Slightly less obviously, though, one might argue that the novels reflect not only society's preoccupations and anxieties, but also its hopes. Thus we read the crime novel not because it reflects our reality, but because it presents an alternative, preferable reality, in which criminals are brought to justice and lovers are brought to bed. Even a writer as unflinchingly realist as Deon Meyer realises that his readers want a resolution in which, by and large, justice prevails, even though we all know that in the vast majority of cases in South Africa it does not prevail. Indeed, few of the stories in this collection allow the malefactors to get off scot-free, except where the murder is itself presented as an act of justice, as in Dirk Jordaan's "Masterclass", Jassy Mackenzie's "The Beginning" and, gruesomely, in Tracey Farren's "Chop Shop". Interestingly, in all these instances, the murder is presented as retribution for an act of sexual molestation: the maiden in distress has always had some violent defenders.

Somewhat differently, Joanne Hichens, in her introduction to the collection, offers her "personal view" of the function of crime fiction: "[it] tells stories of the dark side and gives us the opportunity to face the dark side – the evil that others do, as well as our own intrinsic darkness – the probability that evil exists in all of us, and that we are each one of us capable of terrible acts." Her own contribution to the collection, "Sweet Life", certainly conforms to this pattern: an account of kinky sex gone wrong, it is brutally unforgiving of its unattractive protagonist and antagonist.

Richard Kunzmann's story, "If Nothing Else", proposes, through its crime-writing protagonist, a somewhat similar rationale behind crime-writing, as the would-be author starts applying his art to real life: "By claiming this moment, I would embrace the violence inside me, and thereby the brutality manifest in the greater world."

Kunzmann's story bravely makes its point by being in itself about as unpleasant as anything in this collection. He is clearly challenging his reader: if we don't stop reading, we are complicit in the act of violence being perpetrated both on the victim and the reader. The fact that here, too, as in Hichens's story, the darkness within manifests itself in sado-masochistic sex suggests that the appeal of this particular kind of crime writing, to those who do find it appealing, is somewhat similar to that of pornography: a salacious vicarious excitement, a crude violation of norms judged to be restrictive: "I would reject society's intrusion of me and free myself from the unknown," says Kunzmann's protagonist.

Interestingly, Kunzmann's intrepid explorer of the unknown does fall foul of "society's intrusion" in the conventional enough person of an overweight cop. Joanne Hichens mentions that "a couple" of the stories "touch on apathy and corruption in the ranks of the cops, which rings only too true." Indeed, a story like "Anger Mismanagement" by Diale Tlholwe does feature corruption amongst cops, but on the whole it is remarkable how

positively the police force is portrayed in these stories – another piece of wishful thinking, perhaps?

In David Dison's "Louis Botha Avenue", for instance, set at the height of the xenophobic violence, Dison's investigator, Nossel, enters a police station "to find out how the boys in blue were handling this onslaught": "Inside, the sight that met him was gratifying. Teams of cops were gathered around four different workstations, some manning two-way radios, others laptops, and others processing refugee witnesses."

Deon Meyer gives us once again one of his all-too-fallible but effective cops, this time Fransman Dekker, whose Achilles heel, as it were, is his dick. He is pitted against not only a crime syndicate but Inspector Mbali Kaleni, the overweight busybody Zulu feminist who will show no mercy should she discover that Dekker had been tampering not only with the evidence but pre-mortem with the victim. But Meyer allows Dekker to get away with his minor felony and to round up the major felon: if not altogether a victory for abstract justice, then at any rate a success for the police force.

The overweight cop-investigator is fast becoming a stock figure in crime fiction. Apart from Kunzman's Captain Vosloo, we have Peter Church's Sergeant Visser in "The One", Michael Stanley's Detective Bengu, whose nickname, Kubu, means "hippopotamus", and Deon Meyer's Mbale Kaleni, combining to suggest that there may be some connection between obesity and detective powers – a suggestion perhaps derived from Rex Stout's legendary fat detective Nero Wolfe, and since reinforced by Alexander McCall Smith's Precious Ramotswe. Could this be a tortoise-and-hare archetype surviving in the collective unconscious?

But perhaps we need not be so overly sociological in explaining the appeal of crime fiction. Most people like a brisk story-line, a tight plot, resourceful characters and a plot reversal or two. Of these pleasures this collection offers an abundance. My own favourites were Meyer's "Nostradamus Document", Andrew Brown's "Occam's Razor", Mike Nicol's "The Fixer" and Peter Church's "The One" – but you are encouraged to buy your own copy and make your own choice.