

*Like Clockwork* by Margie Orford (Oshun)

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The plot of this new Cape Town thriller is both nasty and far-fetched. It is also highly readable.

This may be because Orford has a sense of character that does much to float us through the quicksands of plot. In the first place, her central character, Clare Hart, is mature but fit ("A decade of running had earned her a lean, supple fitness that still surprised her"), independent (she has just completed a documentary film on "the implosion of the eastern Congo"), learned (she likes to be called Dr Clare Hart; we assume her doctorate is in criminology, though we're never told that) and sexually active (she and the chief investigator, Captain Rediwaan Faizal, have an on-again off-again relationship). She's not too great on humour, but in her line of work a sense of humour would count as bad taste. The police use her as a profiler of serial killers, it is not quite clear on what basis, other than that she gets to sleep with the Captain.

In the second place, Rediwaan is sexily dissolute, often unshaven, shakily in control of incipient alcoholism, tragically bereft of wife and daughter, and a Muslim, though presumably a lapsed one. He's a bit of a maverick, as investigators have to be in crime novels, and has been side-lined for using methods that make him a community hero but unacceptable to the Constitution.

There is enough of a hint of back-story to both of these characters to suggest that they have a life beyond the plot. And they are surrounded by secondary characters who are almost too big for their roles: elsewhere they could feature in their own stories. A refugee from the DRC is chef's assistant in a sushi restaurant; a rent boy with a drug habit has a music scholarship to a fancy school; the state pathologist is in love with his plump wife; one of the victims has a nasty little brother who plants a webcam in the girls' change room at school.

There is such abundant life to all these characters that one almost feels they are short-changed through having such small roles in this production. But in fact they are more important than their number of lines would seem to suggest, in that they lend verisimilitude to things in general.

Things in general are in truth much in need of verisimilitude, which is to say that the plot teeters precariously on the brink of the absurd. There is a serial killer who dresses up his teenage victims in designer trash, and then mutilates them horribly on camera, before displaying them in symbolic postures, complete with bridal bouquet, on the Sea Point promenade. There is a strip club with lap dancers and pole dancers, there are lots of porn movies, mainly featuring bondage and flagellation, and starring, in one instance, the very unwilling wife of a member of the audience; there is a super-pimp who carves his initials on the backs of his women, there are young women enslaved, there are rich and shady business men (gangsters and property developers, virtually synonymous ever since Carl Hiaasen), there is Clare's twin sister, deranged since being gang-raped twenty years ago and now prone to sending Clare portentous Tarot cards. There is, in short, all of God's plenty if you have a sadistic-voyeuristic streak.

There are also more coincidences than in a Dickens novel. Clare just happens to be jogging past when the first murder is discovered; the rent boy who discovers the second

murder just happens to have Clare's business card in his satchel; the man who discovers the third murder just happens to share a house with a parking attendant who just happens to have had dealings with Clare recently, and who comes straight to her with the news, just happening to know where she lives. Thus Clare just happens to be the first official presence at all three murders, which in any other novel would have made her a prime suspect.

A thriller writer can get away with a lurid and contrived plot if the surface reality of the story, the setting and the props, are convincingly faked. The more outlandish the events, the more firmly the novel needs to be anchored in a believable milieu. But Orford unfortunately lets her story down by her sloppy way with detail. She has Clare go to bed with a man on Friday evening and wake up on Sunday morning, and not because she's slept through Saturday. She has someone buy sunflowers in mid-winter; she has her characters watch the sun set well after six o' clock in winter. She has Clare remember that one of her suspects has conveniently if implausibly given her his business card, after we've witnessed the whole of their interchange without any business card changing hands. A character lights a cigarette and not two minutes later "lit a fresh one from the stump."

These are trivial lapses of continuity that could have been picked up by a good editor, and one wonders why they weren't – perhaps for the same reason that so many typographical errors slipped through. Be that as it may, they contribute to an air of unreality surrounding and undermining as fine a set of characters as ever set off in search of a plot.