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In an early scene, one of the protagonists of this novel meets a prospective client in a restaurant. He notices that she is reading a hardcover book: *Dead before Dying*. The allusion, as aficionados of the genre will know, is to Deon Meyer's set-in-Cape Town thriller, one of a series featuring washed-out cops, dead-beat criminals and slightly shop-soiled females. Presumably the product placement is a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement on Nicol and Hichens' part that they're not the first in the field.

And indeed *Out to Score* has the same gritty, smoggy, Nescafe-and-brandy kind of squalor as Meyer's novels, and the same intensely local plot-line. It features not one but two disillusioned cops, Jeffrey 'Mullet' Mendes and Vincent Saldana. Having become sick of the ill-compensated perils of policing, Mendes and Saldana have embarked on a new career as private investigators.

A private investigator will always labour in the shadow of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, with his world-weary cynicism and wary randiness, and Mullet and Vincent could have been conceived as anti-Marlowes. They, too, are beset by the advances of rich, glamorous and mysterious females (a female apiece in this case), and they too discover that where the female prowls, a whole den of predatory males stalk. But Mullet, so named after his intensely unfashionable hair-style, and Saldana, bleary-eyed half-Chinese half-alcoholic, lack all pretense to the sophistication of Marlowe: their office is a mess of old clothes and empty bottles, since Vincent has been using it as a doss-house; Mullet cannot abide the pretensions of cappuccino and espresso, preferring the comfort of instant coffee. His "new bird", Rae-Anne, is an ex-junkie with an artificial leg as souvenir of her habit.

Apart from these not-immediately-appealing heroes, Nicol and Hichens have assembled a richly cosmopolitan cast. Mullet's client is Judith Oxford, with her "posh accent that was probably English English", married to one Roger Oxford, a Brit with some connections in Taipei and, apparently, a taste for local rent boys and "prozzies." Oxford is financial adviser (for which read money launderer) to one Jim Woo, Taiwanese national, owner of a magnificent Cape-Dutch wine farm, organiser of "the ultimate hunt" for those who have hunted everything on earth except human beings. Woo is also the business partner of one Marina Welsh, who just happens to be Vincent Saldana's client.

What connects all these people is that over-rated Cape delicacy, abalone. Prized in the East as an aphrodisiac and priced accordingly, it has become the centre of a highly competitive international smuggling racket. At one end of the chain are the Cape fisher-folk, outraged at the government quotas that, they believe, deprive them of their livelihood; at the other end of the chain is the Brotherhood, a satisfyingly sinister Chinese organisation with a leader called Dragon Fire and some gruesome membership rituals.

One of the sleazier links in the chain is Tommy Fortune, an ex-drug dealer not so much reformed as converted to the greater profits of the abalone racket, abetted by his side-kick, the flamboyant moffie Adonis. Tommy's abalone riches have enabled him to buy new front teeth studded with emeralds; Adonis sports a denim jacket with a fur collar.

Mullet is hired by Judith Oxford to trail Roger Oxford and furnish photographic evidence of his infidelities; Vincent is hired by Marina Welsh to find out the names of the people who have been raiding her (and Jim Woo's) abalone farm. Thus the two investigators – and the reader – are drawn into an intrigue of Byzantine complexity.

Nicol and Hichens sacrifice mystery to tension by informing the reader quite early on that both Marina and Judith are up to no good, and that our boys are on bogus missions, the victims of an elaborate hoax. This reader indeed was left wondering why exactly, in terms of the plot, it was necessary for the women to employ the investigators in the first place, but such is the momentum of the action that such questions do not arise except in retrospect.

*Out to Score* is a fast-paced, dirty-talking, street-wise page-turner. The Cape milieu from chardonnay-quaffing Waterfront to glue-sniffing Lavender Hill is graphically reproduced, with its full range of accents and attitudes. Mullet's side-line as a dagga dealer brings into play a supporting cast of academic pot-heads, and his own addiction to the weed is a recurring motif.

This is to say that *Out to Score* is not fastidious in its depiction of the drug scene, or of any other scene for that matter. Most of the characters seem to be racists, sexists or homophobes, and some are all three. The violence is extreme and frequent, the language Cape vernacular. The novel, in short, is not for the squeamish. Those with strong stomachs, however, will relish it a good story well told, a pungent brew of fast action and double-dealing, with as nasty a cast of villains as one could wish for, and, in the end, two rather likeable heroes. Promisingly, one of the more shadowy of the villains survives the wholesale slaughter at the end, so we can expect to see more of Messrs Mendes and Saldana and, no doubt, the gutsy Rae-Anne. I, for one, look forward to their return.