

*Thirteen Hours* by Deon Meyer (Hodder and Stoughton) Translated from the Afrikaans by K.L. Seegers.

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Billed as ‘the one-man crime wave’, Afrikaans author Deon Meyer was a popular presence at the Franschhoek Literary Festival. His appearance there coincided with the release of *Thirteen Hours*, the English translation of the best-selling Afrikaans novel. I had the opportunity to ask him about this novel and his work in general in an hour-long interview in front of a large audience. What follows is based on that interview, though it is not a literal transcript.

Meyer came to write crime novels almost by chance. As an avid reader of authors like Ed Mc Bain, John D. MacDonald and Frederick Forsyth, he gravitated naturally to that genre when he wrote his first novel *Wie Met Vuur Speel* (the one book of his not translated into English: Meyer regards it as an apprentice piece). He resists the tag “crime writer”, because he would rather be seen simply as a story-teller; though he also demurs at any suggestion that his novels aspire to the exalted state of “literature.” Whereas his Afrikaans titles (*Orion*, *Feniks*, *Proteus* and *Infanta*) have a certain ring of terse grandeur about them, the English titles (generally not thought up by Meyer himself) are frankly blood-and-guts: *Dead Before Dying*, *Dead at Daybreak*, *The Heart of the Hunter*, *Blood Safari* ...

*Thirteen Hours* has a more restrained title, though Meyer points out that the figure 13 has its own cluster of associations, none of them pleasant. The idea of a limited span of time, too, promises a fair deal of nail-biting, a promise on which this novel abundantly delivers.

Set in a very recognisable, meticulously rendered Cape Town, *Thirteen Hours* traces the flight of a young American tourist, one Rachel Anderson, from a group of shadowy pursuers who have cut the throat of her travelling companion for reasons that Meyer keeps us guessing at for the better part of 400 pages. Rachel’s flight is cross-cut with the plight of Detective Benny Griessel, who grew from comic relief in *Dead Before Dying*, through a supporting role in *Devil’s Peak*, to a starring role here: beset with domestic

woes – his wife has kicked him out of the house because of his drinking problems, his daughter is in London – and embroiled in the complications arising from the “transformation” of the SAPS, Griessel is hard-pressed to give his full attention to solving the murder of the one young American while trying to find the other young American before the hoodlums do. At the same time there is the murder of a prominent record executive with an alcoholic wife, the ex-singer Alexa Barnard ...

It’s a rich mix, expertly manipulated. Meyer says he keeps track of his characters’ movements and locations on a spread sheet, and it shows, in the meticulous timing of the novel. But the novel never seems schematically plotted; for a start, the locations are rendered with such verisimilitude that one has a very strong sense of the physical environment (you could spend a long day on a walking tour of the upper reaches of the Cape Town City Bowl with the novel as your guide). But more important, his characters are so fully conceived that they seem, as the cliché has it, to assume a life of their own. Meyer indeed, though claiming that the plot is paramount to him, speaks of his characters as if they were living beings, at times insistent on having their own way with the plot. He agrees that this may be because even his minor, incidental characters, are conceived with a back story: Meyer knows where they came from and where they’ve been, even though their sole function is to be here and now for a few pages. Thus a somewhat cheesy couple of gospel singers acquire some pathos and even dignity when seen against the background of their struggle towards respectability.

This exploration of the humanity of his characters is nowhere more apparent than in Meyer’s handling of his cops. He does not shirk the fact that the Police Service can be a somewhat rough and ready outfit, and that professional relations are often strained. His policemen and women are flawed, but they are human beings, and they have to contend with situations that would defeat most people. Meyer expresses some impatience with the complaints of the great South African public that the police are corrupt, or inefficient, or not as nice as the British coppers. Here is Bennie Griessel, speaking to his colleague Fransman Dekker, who has just complained that as a Coloured policeman he is being sidelined in the new Force:

“I have been a policeman for over twenty-five years, Fransman, and I’m telling you now, they will always treat you like a dog, the people, the press, the bosses, politicians,

regardless of whether you are black, white or brown. Unless they're phoning you in the middle of the night saying 'there's someone at the window' – then you're the fucking hero. But tomorrow when the sun shines, you're nothing again. The question is: can you take it? Ask yourself that. If you can't, get another job. Or put up with it, Fransman, because it's never going to stop.”

It is this – the overriding concern for his characters – together with his complete visualisation of every situation, down to the smallest detail, that gives Meyer's riveting plots their substance and their depth. For although we keep reading to find out what happens next, we come back to the books for their rich humanity.

Meyer is warmly appreciative of his translator, Laure Seegers, and one can see why: his tough, colloquial Afrikaans has been beautifully rendered in an English that manages to convey both the rough energy and the strange lyricism of the original. There is no excuse for English-speaking readers not to discover, like millions of French, German, Polish, Swedish, Spanish (the list goes on ...) readers, this wonderful South African author.