

*Tromp's Last Stand* by Tim Keegan (Umuzi) R145

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If fiction has any bearing on reality, Cape Town would seem to be the crime capital of the country. Hard on the heels of Margie Orford's *Like Clockwork* and Mike Nicol/Joanne Hichens's *Out to Score*, not to mention several novels by Deon Meyer, comes Tim Keegan's comic novel about the seamy underside of the Mother City.

As in *Out to Score*, there are two private investigators who have gone private because their public services (army and police respectively) are no longer required in the new dispensation: "All certainty is gone. What does a man believe in these days, what *is* there to believe in?"

They are, in short, relics of the apartheid state, nostalgic for the old days when the whites were still in charge, but somehow not in themselves great exemplars of the blessed state of whiteness. Jake Tromp, the central character, is an alcoholic (which private investigator isn't?) whose wife has left him and whose office/bedroom is in Voortrekker Street, Vasco (Keegan's urban topography is very precise), above a sleazy bar and opposite the quarters of a French Model. His refrigerator is full of rotten food and he washes himself, when he bothers, in the kitchen sink. And Jake is one of the cleaner characters in the novel. His sidekick, Frikkie, is nothing if not loyal, basically because he is intellectually incapable of contemplating duplicity.

Again as in *Out to Score*, the Northern Suburb lowlifes are bankrolled by the ill-gotten gains of the Southern Suburb highlifes, in this instance one Cecil Bennie, a property developer, which, as often in this genre, is synonymous with the worst kind of moral degeneracy. True to type, he lives in Constantia with a dissatisfied wife and unpleasant children.

The plot is kick-started by Jake's kidnapping of Bennie's daughter – except that he nets the au pair instead, a feisty Cuban-American, Maria Figueroa, whose father, a shady Miami entrepreneur, immediately assumes that the agents of Fidel Castro are behind the kidnapping, and dispatches two goons of his own to South Africa to deal with the matter. Jake and Frikkie, now with Maria's help, go back to collect the real Miss Caroline Bennie, thinking to collect a double ransom, but succeeding only in attracting, at Bennie's behest, the attention of private investigator no 2, Fred Zietsman. Caroline suffers from a variety of extremely unattractive diseases, and spends the book with a transistor radio glued to her ear; she nevertheless manages to engage the affections, such as they are, of Frikkie.

Add to the mix the only legitimate cop, one Hendrickse, eager to prove his prowess and out-do his erstwhile superior, and ... well, the plot doesn't so much thicken as curdle, as nothing goes according to plan and yet everything more or less sags into place. Since nobody is much better or much worse than anybody else, the reader is not likely to waste too much adrenaline rooting for any of the parties, but the events are interesting enough in themselves to keep one's attention.

*Tromp's Last Stand* does not aim for psychological realism or complexity of characterisation. The central characters are defined in terms of their physical appearance, bodily appetites, monetary ambitions, and lack of auxiliary verbs; the secondary characters are as rudimentary as stick figures, albeit with some spectacular physical

aberrations. They are there to keep the plot moving, which they do competently enough not to seem redundant.

Given that the novel's evident aim is above all to entertain, it might be impertinent to seek social or political commentary here. The characters themselves, of course, are forever sounding off about The Way Things Are Going, but their commentary serves to place them rather than their society: they are the newly-disinherited office-bearers of a defunct order, resentfully trudging along in clapped-out Sentras, in the dust of the BMWs of the previously disadvantaged. It would be difficult to mount any serious social critique on the gripes of Jake and Fred, and I don't think the novel is trying to do so, any more than it is trying to discourage tourism to the Fairest Cape, though it may well have that effect.

*Tromp's Last Stand*, in short, does not have a moral or political agenda: it is, at most, amused at the old and the new South Africa alike, and it invites us to share in its wry mirth.