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South African Crime Fiction: Sleuthing the State post-1994

Samantha Naidu & Elizabeth le Roux

Abstract: In this essay we demonstrate how the burgeoning field of South African crime fiction has responded to the birth and development of a democratic, post-apartheid South African state. First, an overview of South African crime fiction in the last twenty years is presented. Then the essay presents an argument for South African crime fiction to be regarded as the ‘new political novel’, based on its capacity for socio-political analysis. In the following section, the genre-snob debate and the resurgence of such terms as ‘lowbrow’ and ‘highbrow’ are considered in relation to crime fiction and the role it plays in the socio-cultural arena of post-apartheid South Africa. We conclude with a comment on the significance of popular literary genres for democracy and critical discourses which underpin that democracy. The essay shows that crime fiction is a strong tool for socio-political analysis in a democratic South Africa, because it promotes critical discourse in society, despite it being deemed lowbrow or ideologically ambiguous.

1. Introduction

Some of the most exciting writing in South Africa of the past 20 years has been in the area of popular fiction. Crime fiction, in particular, has flourished, and together with another popular genre, romance fiction, has become the most widely read literature in South Africa today (SABDC; Niensens). In recent years, academics in South Africa and beyond have begun to take heed of this literary category which has burgeoned since 1994. However, the bulk of the attention has come from reviewers, bloggers, fans and authors themselves, and this may seem fitting for a popular genre often deemed to be ‘lowbrow’. Only a handful of scholars have engaged earnestly and critically with this category and in the past most of that engagement has taken place in para-academic forums. There have been literary festivals (or panels at literary festivals) dedicated to crime fiction,¹ a special issue of the journal *WordsEtc* in 2010, a dedicated blog on Books LIVE called Crime Beat,² a robust and contentious debate on SlipNet,³ a brief article on Media Club South Africa heralding a “new phenomenon”,⁴ and numerous reviews, profiles and interviews in newspapers.

¹ For example, the CrimeWrite Festival in Johannesburg (2010), the Franschoek Literary Festival (2012), the Richmond Boek Bedonnerd Literary Festival (2012) and Afrikanissimo – Festival of African Literatures in Frankfurt, Germany (2013).

² A blog created and maintained for many years by doyen of South African crime fiction, Mike Nicol.

³ This is an outlet for the Stellenbosch Literary Project, maintained by the Department of English at Stellenbosch University. It has been the site of the most in-depth and cutting-edge debates about South African crime fiction in recent years. Available at <http://SlipNet.co.za/?s=genre+snob+debate> (accessed 18 January 2013).

⁴ C. Thurman, ‘Crime lit in South Africa: a new phenomenon’, *MediaClubSouthAfrica.com* (December 2010), available at

These parleys have focused mainly on what has come to be known as the 'genre snob' debate, a discussion about the cultural status of South African crime fiction, which raises the questions: is it 'highbrow' or 'lowbrow', credibly representative of a turbulent and crime-ridden society, or is it just sensationalist, escapist, marketable entertainment limited by generic conventions?

Contentiously, there have been arguments for South African crime fiction to be considered as *bona fide* South African literature, some even claiming for it the status of the new 'political novel' in post-apartheid South Africa.⁵ There have been celebrations of its propensity for socio-political analysis, its offers of catharsis⁶ and vicarious justice in an unremitting social landscape, its power to delight and its potential to instruct. Conversely, commentators have warned against the precarious ideological positioning of a literary category which is aimed at high sales volumes and easy consumption, and which at the same time attempts socio-political analysis of the gravest issues facing the nation.⁷ Detractors see crime fiction as straddling the imperatives of artistic merit and commercial success, and their trenchant question is: how can a literary category which relies on voyeurism, graphic violence and hyperbole be afforded the status of academic object of enquiry alongside 'great' literature, or of sociological tool, particularly in the South African context where crime is a scourge and justice a thorny notion? More recently though, more formal and comprehensive academic publications such as a special issue of *Current Writing* published in September 2013,⁸ has established South African crime fiction incontrovertibly as a scholarly subject. Discernible in this evolution of the criticism elicited by South African crime fiction in the past few years is a compelling thrust – to *investigate* the depth and scope of this subject, and to assess what comment it makes on contemporary, democratic South African society. While immediately after the end of apartheid there was a suggestion by various literary critics that the political and the aesthetic could now be disentangled, in post-apartheid fiction there are in fact continued, and in many instances new forms of, political engagement as well as aesthetic value in a commonly undervalued genre of literary production – crime fiction.

http://www.mediaclubsouthafrica.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2126:crimelit-231201&catid=43:culturenews&Itemid=112 (accessed 16 January 2013).

⁵ See *SlipNet* for the full discussion.

⁶ See C. Warnes, 'Writing Crime in the New South Africa: Negotiating Threat in the Novels of Deon Meyer and Margie Orford', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, 4 (2012), pp. 981-991.

⁷ See M. Titlestad and A. Polatinsky, 'Turning to Crime: Mike Nicol's *The Ibis Tapestry* and *Payback*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 45, 2 (2010), pp. 259- 273.

⁸ *Current Writing*, 25, 2 (2013).

2. Writing crime since 1994

The prevalence of crime-fiction, along with the counter-discourse of law and order it has provoked, has become one of the most important features of postapartheid society, and one that has had a profound impact on literary production. Crime writing and detective fiction have flourished since 1994. (Barnard, 2006)

The explosion of crime writing in South Africa since the 1990s is often dated to the publication of Deon Meyer's first novel, *Wie Met Vuur Speel* (published by Tafelberg in 1994). Meyer has repeatedly stated that "(t)here has never been a culture in Afrikaans of thriller writing" (cited in Davis, 2013), that he was "the first to publish, back in 1994" (Meyer, n.d.), and that *Wie Met Vuur Speel* "was the first suspense novel in Afrikaans for three decades" (Meyer, 2013). But this is not the full story, as the publishing local industry produced a certain amount of crime fiction throughout the apartheid years, especially in Afrikaans (Le Roux, 2013). Post-apartheid, crime fiction has grown, but not in an easy upward trajectory. Venter's (2006: 526) analysis of the production of Afrikaans fiction for the period 1990 to 2005, shows that 75% of all titles published were popular fiction and about 6% were crime fiction. Venter shows that production of this genre actually declined between 2000 and 2005 – partly as a proportion of greater output overall, across a variety of genres – although there has been a sharper upward trend since about 2008. Today, in terms of sales figures, the broad "Crime/ Mystery" category is second in popularity in terms of fiction, behind romance (Betts, 2012), while 24% of readers report regularly reading "crime/thrillers" (SABDC, 2007: 69). In other words, more crime fiction is being published and read in South Africa nowadays, but this does not mean it is an entirely new genre in this country.

In 1994, Meyer was not alone in writing in this genre, as 28 other crime fiction titles were also published in Afrikaans. In 1992, in fact, the local Afrikaans publisher Human & Rousseau began to specialise in this genre, re-issuing the works of Doc Immelman and seeking new authors like Alex Muller (the pseudonym of Eleanor Baker), Chris Moolman, and Nic Tredoux. Meyer moved from Tafelberg to Queillerie with his second novel and then to Human & Rousseau with his third – although all of these are in fact imprints of the huge Afrikaans trade publisher, NB – and has remained there ever since. After restructuring within NB after 2001, Tafelberg became the main imprint for literary fiction, political non-fiction, and children's books, while Human & Rousseau focuses on popular fiction for the general market. Authors are attracted to Human & Rousseau now because of Deon Meyer's star status and success in the crime fiction genre – his titles now regularly sell more than 40 000 copies each, in Afrikaans – and because of the good service they receive from the publishers and editors like Etienne Bloemhof.

Meyer has also been successful because he was able to quickly attract the attention of an international literary agent (Isobel Dixon) and the sale of the English-language rights meant that his work became more accessible to a world-wide audience. The sale of English-language rights to Hodder (under their imprint, Coronet) in 1999 was thus crucial to his global success. As Dixon (2013) notes, “English editions are vital for any book’s success on the international market, especially when you have a source language like Afrikaans, with few proficient readers and translators internationally.” Ingrid Winterbach agrees, describing the pressure on Afrikaanse writers to be translated, in order to gain respect and recognition: “As an Afrikaans writer you will only be taken seriously when read in translation” (cited in Kleyn, 2013: 135). As a result, “Meyer’s major success has been in breaking through to the international market” (Groenewald 2007).

Meyer is also an interesting example of a crime fiction author in South Africa because he operates at the interface between book culture and consumer culture: his works are both ‘lowbrow’ in that they are popular examples of genre fiction, and ‘highbrow’ in that he has won a variety of literary awards and been translated into many languages. While this may be an unusual position in terms of the global publishing industry, it is not an unfamiliar situation for South African authors and publishers. Meyer’s novels, such as *Orion* (H&R, 2000) and *Infanta* (LAPA, 2004) were successfully inserted into local literary circles through book reviews by academics, book launches (including one at the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkudemuseum en Navorsingsentrum, or NALN), and selection for book clubs. *Infanta* was written as part of Meyer’s Master’s degree in creative writing, and was supported by the Afrikaans Foundation for Language and Culture (ATKV), and published by their publishing unit, LAPA. A review of *Infanta* by English Literature academic Andries Wessels (2004) reflects Meyer’s growing cultural capital as an Afrikaans writer and his increasing popularity. In addition, *Orion* won the ATKV prize and the M-Net book prize in 2001, and *Proteus* won the ATKV prize in 2003. This led to a great deal of publicity, especially in the Afrikaans media. Further prizes, at fairly regular intervals, have ensured that Meyer’s work has remained very firmly in the public eye, and has contributed to both his economic and his cultural capital as an author. As a result, the binary division of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ culture breaks down when confronted with such forms of fiction, particularly within the South African context, where only a very small percentage of the population is actually reading fiction at all (SABDC, 2007).

Meyer’s success and seemingly constant place in the public eye has also raised the public profile of crime fiction in South Africa. At the same time, there is greater diversity of voices, as there appear to be more authors turning to this genre, more publishers expanding their lists in this area, and increased public willingness to buy local crime fiction titles. The latter aspect has been boosted by improved access to leisure books at bookshops, improved marketing and packaging of local titles,

and promotional campaigns such as Exclusive Books' Homebru marketing project (see Le Roux, 2014). All of the major trade publishers in South Africa are now actively building their lists in this genre: Human & Rousseau and other NB imprints, as well as Kwela, Umuzi, Jacana, LAPA and Penguin. The diversity of themes linked to crime fiction has expanded vastly, with themes as varied as reconciliation and the apartheid past, gender violence, political corruption and climate change providing additional texture to the whodunnit. And local authors are certainly trying their hand at the genre in greater numbers – though some argue that the majority are still white writers – with some even moving from more weighty literary categories to crime – Mike Nicol, for one, has been criticised for his “decision to abandon high-literary interrogations of the history of apartheid violence and the agonies of transition in favour of writing popular crime fiction” (Titlestad & Polatinsky, 2010: 260). Such criticism, as this essay will show, does not acknowledge crime fiction's engagement with the most pressing social issues facing South Africa today. Crime fiction is worthy of critical attention precisely because it has a special propensity to engage with such themes as history, violence and the challenges of transition.

3. The 'new political novel'

In a diseased social body, illness is analogous to an act of 'crime'. Crime is the cancer that routs the healthy order of things. And the crime thriller genre is the most convenient form, with which to write about the diseased social body because its narrative quest involves a protagonist 'solving the crime' – that is going to the heart of the sickness in the social body and staring it down. (De Kock 2011: 6)

In a provocative and insightful review Leon De Kock identified the accessibility, popularity, and success of South African crime fiction. This success, it would seem, rests on crime fiction's ability to perform socio-political analysis. Germane to our argument about the hermeneutics of South African crime fiction is De Kock's recognition (contrary to Titlestad & Polatinsky's view) that crime fiction “contains the generic elements best suited to social analysis” (*ibid*). The same generic elements which ensure “readability”, also facilitate “socio-political analysis” (*ibid*). Crime fiction's form (simultaneously formulaic and protean), its content (simultaneously sensationalist and realist), and its ambiguous ideological positioning, afford it a unique triadic capacity for interpretation: 1) socio-political analysis on the part of the author; 2) the 'solving' of a crime on the part of the detective; 3) and the active engagement of the reader in both of these hermeneutic processes. The combined effect is that this popular and accessible literature constitutes an “interpretive strategy” or “explanatory hypothesis” (Wirth, n.d.) for our “diseased social body”. In other words, the crime fiction novel is performing social and political analysis at three levels.

De Kock is not the first South African scholar to acknowledge crime fiction's facility to offer cogent socio-political analysis. In 1994 Michael Green made a similar claim for Wessel Ebersohn's novels (Green: 1994). Written during the apartheid era (in the 1970s to the 1990s), Ebersohn's crime fiction focuses on the perverse ideologies of the apartheid state, and in effect they constitute a sustained critique of what Geoffrey Davis calls "the laager mentality, the ideology and the criminal activities of the Security Branch" (Davis 2006: 188). Green's project was to inscribe the role of historian for Ebersohn whose risky creation of a Jewish policeman-psychologist detective-hero, Yudel Gordon, is opposed to apartheid. Davis sums up: "[I]n each novel ... the investigation of a single case widens out into an analysis of the 'condition of the nation itself'" (Davis 2006: 186). Similar observations, for example De Kock's and Warne's, are being made about contemporary South African crime fiction, but taken together with its commercial success, they do not, for some critics, secure its status as 'the new political novel'. Rather, they raise questions about credibility.

Of course, crime fiction, as a cultural history of the genre reveals, has always occupied an ambiguous ideological position. Dennis Porter, for example, sees detective writers as "distillers of familiar national essences ... effectively suppress[ing] the historical reality that they seem to represent" (Porter 1981: 218-219). This criticism brings to mind the Golden Age of British crime fiction – the cosy 'whodunnits' of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers whose detectives may very well have acted as "defenders of hegemonic norms and self-perpetuating cultural values" (Rzepka 2005: 22). Charles Rzepka's survey of the cultural analysis of 'classic' detective fiction identifies the influence of social and political theorists Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci on many critics who hold the view that:

[A]s part of modern mass entertainment, detective fiction helps interpellate its readers into conformity with the hegemony of White, male, middle-class values in the Western capitalist-industrialist societies. (Rzepka 2005: 21)

In a similar vein, postcolonial critics studying Golden Age crime fiction have noted "the inextricable link between crime fiction and the imperial enterprise" (Matzke & Mühleisen 2006: 4). Such studies have demonstrated that authority, order and discipline as primary imperial interests were affirmed through the fictional investigation of crime and the reconstruction of social stability (*ibid*). In South Africa, as in other post-colonial locations, the rising diversity of crime fiction, as it proliferates in far-flung geo-cultural locations and mutates into transnational literary phenomena, has resulted in the questioning of authority, social order and notions of justice. At the same time, due to generic conventions, the literature articulates (and satisfies) a desire for credible authority, social order and equitable justice. In postcolonial terms, the very ideologies promulgated by the literary antecedents (the 'whodunnits' of the Golden Age) are now being dissected by the progeny:

... postcolonial texts moreover suggest that power and authority can be investigated through the magnifying glass of other knowledges, against the local or global mainstream, past and present, or against potential projections of a dominant group and a (neo)imperial West. (Matzke & Mühleisen 2006: 5)

Matzke and Mühleisen include South African crime fiction in this category - 'crime fiction from a transcultural perspective' - with its power for postcolonial intervention. In the post-apartheid context, although South African crime fiction generically resembles the American hard-boiled or noir thriller, arguably insurgent in comparison to the 'classic whodunit',⁹ its imbrication with dominant social structures should not be obscured by its national and transnational analytical clout. De Kock appropriately tempers his article with a comment on this complicity i.e. he makes a correlation between the "amoral imperatives of our necrophilic society" (2012) and the conventions of the genre. Both, he argues, are driven by economic forces and the psychology of consumerism. So, if crime and crime fiction are both motivated by need or greed, then crime fiction in South Africa occupies a somewhat blurry ideological position. Crucially though, the same generic conventions which determine commercial success perform socio-political analysis. The question is, does commercial success, which also signifies a large and diverse readership, discredit or disqualify crime fiction as 'the new political novel'?

On the contrary, we argue, it is this very ideological ambiguity which facilitates its hermeneutic capacity in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. As the overview of literature in the previous section demonstrates, crime fiction interrogates every facet of society and critically engages with pertinent themes such as child abuse, political corruption, ecology, and organised crime. Often, the voiceless and the marginalised are represented in these novels, for example, Margie Orford's victims of gender-based violence who are portrayed poignantly and compassionately. Also, many of these novels investigate current crimes which have their roots in the apartheid era. Mike Nicol's revenge trilogy does this with former 'struggle' comrades, Mace Bishop and Pylon Buso, featuring as a detective-hero duo that is pitted against a formidable criminal who is entangled with their political past. But it is not just the content which renders crime fiction the 'new political novel'. The conventions of the genre ensure its accessibility and popularity. There is a diverse readership within South Africa and internationally who are participating in investigating the crimes which beset our young democracy. In this 'new political novel', the author, the fictional detectives and the readers are together analysing and solving some of the most serious and disturbing crimes facing the state.

⁹ A parallel can be made between Nixon's reign when extremely high corruption levels in the USA saw the birth of the hardboiled crime fiction novel, and post-apartheid South Africa. The inception and extreme popularity of crime fiction in such a context signifies perhaps a desire for justice and the restoration of order.

Blind adherence to generic conventions and trite trotting out of formulaic texts does not earn crime fiction the status as 'new political novel'. As in every genre or category of literature, there are variations in quality or literary merit. The previous section outlined Deon Meyer's career as South Africa's pre-eminent crime fiction author, and this level of success warrants closer inspection. Meyer's strength lies in his ability to combine the most cogent socio-political analysis with the conventions of the hard-boiled, thriller sub-genre of crime fiction, and to this potent formula he adds a creative aesthetic element which includes an exploration of personal and national histories, an appreciation of locale, experimentation with narrative situation, and compelling, convincing characterisation. Meyer's earlier novels, published in the infant years of democracy, feature white Afrikaans detectives, many of whom once served the apartheid regime as members of the South African Police force. But characters like Mat Joubert and Zatopek van Heerden are not stereotypical white racists. On the contrary, they are good men who are struggling to reconcile the past with the present, and to figure out their roles as law enforcers in the 'new' South Africa. *Dead at Daybreak* (2000)¹⁰ touches on the Angolan War and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. However, it is really in *Heart of the Hunter* (2003) that Meyer comes into his own.

In *Heart of the Hunter* Meyer displays his skill at balancing socio-political analysis with entertainment value. He uses a typical thriller plot and local setting to describe the protagonist's dare-devil motorbike journey from Cape Town to Lusaka. With this suspenseful journey Meyer manages to weave together a critique of the post-apartheid government's intelligence unit, an evocation of the Karoo, and the contemplation of a complex character who, through the course of this journey, assumes the status of mythological hero, yet is known to be a brutal killer. Thobela Mpayipheli, the former KGB hitman¹¹ and Mkhonto we Sizwe operative has to use his detective and military skills to remain one step ahead of his pursuers from the Presidential Intelligence Unit. The reader too is propelled headlong on this journey, travelling alongside Thobela, whose struggle to rehabilitate after the violence of the apartheid era has enlisted the sympathies of the reader. Thobela becomes a symbol for moral justice and honour, perhaps even an ideal of democracy and of the new nation. Certainly, Meyer ensures that the reader sides with him against formal structures of law (which are shown to be corrupt), guessing with him what the next obstacle will be and how best to outwit his foes. At the same time the reader is forced to consider the cracks and fissures in the new government. Ultimately, this is a novel which probes a social malaise ubiquitous in South Africa – the legacy of the past intruding on the present, tainting individual lives and operations of the state. After the thrill of the hunt, what this novel offers for Thobela, the society he lives in, and the reader

¹⁰ Publication date given is when the novel was first published in English.

¹¹ By referring to the KGB, the Cold War and the CIA (and to post 9/11 Muslim fundamentalism, see *Trackers* 2011) Meyer increases his appeal to a global readership.

is a solving of an individual case, but there is no resolution, no conclusive understanding of the crimes which beleaguer the state.

More recently, Meyer has engaged with ecological themes in *Blood Safari* (2009) and *Trackers* (2011), which in itself constitutes a significant development in South African crime fiction. He has also examined human trafficking, the organ trade and police corruption in *Thirteen Hours* (2010), and in *7 Days* (2012), Meyer explores, topically and rather chillingly, public perceptions of the South African Police Services. What Meyer's *oeuvre* demonstrates is the intersection of socio-political analysis and generic conventions in a literary genre which stimulates critical engagement with real-life and fictional crime. Meyer's novels interpret crime in South Africa by utilising the generic conventions of the crime thriller to ensure both readability and commercial success. The cultural, historical, and political material which anchor his plots and characters are praised in almost every single review for two reasons: its interpretation of contemporary South African society; and its familiar appeal to local readers or exotic appeal to foreign readers. Similarly, academic articles written about Meyer thus far focus on this aspect of the texts – the socio-political analysis or the “debate the author wants to register with the readers” (Anderson 2004: 145).¹² To generate this ‘debate’ Meyer draws on material which is of deep concern to the citizens of South Africa whilst also relevant to an international audience. One of the features which distinguishes Meyer aesthetically is his descriptive prose. His settings are infused with ‘South African flavour’, recreating a majestic landscape which is both familiar and exotic, depending on the reader. But what is really at the basis of Meyer's success is his ability to create a ‘new political novel’ in post-apartheid South Africa by merging socio-political analysis and entertainment. Although many of the generic conventions are used this ‘new political novel’ does not blithely offer solutions nor provide complete escapism for the reader. Instead Meyer uses the genre to present what Stephen Knight describes as a “conflict of world-views; which realises perceived conflict in the world” (1980: 5). The fictional detectives and the readers are encouraged to interpret and detect and hypothesise about crime and conflict. All of Meyer's protagonists, like the new South African state, are involved in a process of reinvention or rebirth, and this is perhaps where the literature makes its biggest contribution – the novels attempt to make inferences about an evolving society, one that requires us to: “be able to understand something in a new way by observing and interpreting this something in a new conceptual framework” (Danemark et al 2002: 80). Meyer's crime fiction, and others of the same ilk, can be said to be interpreting post-apartheid South Africa, in what is clearly a crucial contribution towards democracy and social order.

¹² For an exception, see Le Roux and Buitendach (2014), who focus on Meyer's publishing history and the marketing of his works.

4. Ideological debates: A return to the 'genre snob' debate

Edgar Allen Poe, often considered the father of modern crime and detective fiction, experienced a clear disjuncture in the reception of his works by critics, on the one hand, and by readers, on the other: he was critically acclaimed, but not very popular with a mass audience. Nowadays, the opposite view is more prevalent, as crime fiction is regularly dismissed as 'lowbrow' or 'genre fiction', in spite of receiving huge popular acclaim and sales: "Endemic to the ... literary world-view is a rooted dismissal of genre writing – that is to say, popular literature – and a firm belief that any notion of 'cultural production' and serious aesthetics are incompatible" (Worpole, 1984: 5). While the rise of cultural theory may appear to have broken down the distinctions between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' culture, the argument continues to be made that genre fiction is 'lowbrow'.

These ideological debates are not new in the South African context. In the 1950s, the sociologist Geoffrey Cronjé was tasked with setting up a commission to investigate the output and reception of "undesirable" publications. The Cronjé Commission's 1957 report was instrumental in shaping the apartheid-era censorship legislation. As McDonald (2009: 25) notes, the Cronjé Commission was particularly concerned about the undesirability of thrillers and crime fiction: "The overwhelming majority of undesirable novels belong to the category which could be termed tales of suspense, namely, the detective or murder novel or story of villainy, or, in other words, the ordinary thriller" (1957: 110). This report should be set against the background of the paperback revolution from the 1930s. This 'new' format imported many of the traditions of pulp magazines: affordability, low production values, and lurid covers, and was aimed at a mass audience to make money for the publisher. The Cronjé Report describes (and deplores) the US model being replicated South Africa, and suggests that the importing of US paperbacks created a reading public for similar literature in South Africa (1957: 111). As a result, they conceded, there is "money certainly [to be] made out of printed trash and poisonous scum" (1957: 66). Indeed, arguing that quality and quantity were irreconcilable, they implied that a potentially subversive text was less undesirable if it was only expected to circulate among a limited audience, and in particular a limited audience of educated people. Texts reserved for a limited audience were thus considered 'safer' than mass-market fiction, which was considered dangerous and significant because it could potentially reach a wide audience of readers.

In contrast, the commonly accepted view nowadays appears to be that popular fiction is of *less* importance because of its widespread popularity and apparent adherence to generic norms, while works of great literary fiction are *more* significant even if they reach only a small, highly educated readership. The difference is linked to both the aesthetic and political purposes of writing:

“Literature – even when its authors are published by Random House or Harper Collins or any other huge conglomerate in Australia – maintains a rhetorical distance from the world of commerce and the commodity form; while popular fiction sits happily right in the middle of the marketplace. ... [literature] is often claimed as politically progressive, while popular fiction by contrast is rendered conservative, even reactionary” (Knight, 2003: 116).

In South Africa this debate has recently re-emerged in the form of the ‘genre snob’ debate, largely in the blogosphere, and in a few academic articles, such as that criticising “Mike Nicol’s decision to abandon high-literary interrogations of the history of apartheid violence and the agonies of transition in favour of writing popular crime fiction” (Titlestad & Polatinsky, 2010: 260). The key question that is asked in this regard seeks to balance commercial imperatives with aesthetics:

“Detractors see crime fiction straddling the imperatives of artistic merit and commercial success, and their trenchant question is: how can a literary category that relies on voyeurism, graphic violence and hyperbole be afforded the status of an academic object of enquiry, alongside ‘great’ literature, particularly in the South African context, where crime is a scourge and justice a thorny notion?” (Naidu, 2013: 126)

Why has the old highbrow / lowbrow distinction reared its head again, twenty years into the post-apartheid era? We believe that the debate has been resuscitated because contemporary critics are concerned with a political or ideological distinction rather than an aesthetic one. This may be seen in the fact that these points of view – of crime fiction as either dangerous or trivial, primarily because it appeals to a wide readership – are not in fact entirely opposed. Rather, both depend on a certain perception of readers. And readers, after all, are what determine aesthetics: “In referring to any particular aesthetic, I mean the syndrome of factors within a work of art which govern the *audience’s* perception of and appreciation of the work” (David Dorsey, quoted in Rautenbach, 2013). The Cronjé Report had a simplistic view of the reader as a passive consumer of literature, and reiterated the need to protect readers, and especially children. For instance, it argues, “If a child’s taste is formed by love and crime comics, he or she will continue to crave lurid, unreal, violent, and sexy material in print” (1957: 51) – and this danger of “moral disarmament” (1957: 70) was to be guarded against by any means. In particular, the Commissioners found (arguing that it was a “tenable scientific finding”) that certain types of undesirable publications were more conducive to crime than others, by encouraging contempt for the law and the police, and a taste for brutality and violence. Another danger of ‘undesirable literature’ was that it could undermine the position of the “European” in South Africa: “As the torch-bearer in the vanguard of Western civilization in South Africa, the European *must be and remain* the leader, the guiding light, in the spiritual and cultural field, otherwise he will inevitably *go under*” (1957: 148; emphasis in the original). The test for what was undesirable was based on the Hicklin rule, which defined material as obscene if it tended “to

deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall” (ref).

Cronjé based much of his argument about the possible degrading effects of bad literature on the work of Frederic Wertham. Wertham was a psychiatrist, who claimed in the 1950s to be able to ‘prove’ that violent comic books ‘caused’ crime and delinquent behaviour, especially among the young. But his work has long been dismissed: “Wertham’s methods were anecdotal; he had no control groups; and he mistakenly relied on correlations as proof of causation. But his assertions resonated with a public eager for answers to concerns about crime” (Heins & Bertin, 2002). This argument clearly had no actual links to audience research, or to studies of the reception or impact of books, despite Cronjé using it for that purpose. Significantly, the “cultural depravity” deplored by Cronjé and the censors is not much different from that criticised by F.R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* and other literary critics. And, crucially, this argument is still in circulation today.

Today, while support for the moral imperative of great literature has waned, we still find an assumption that popular fiction implies the passive consumption of mass-produced narratives. For instance, Titlestad and Polatinsky, in criticising Mike Nicol’s decision to start writing crime fiction, set up a distinction between texts that promote one or the other kind of reading:

“A “writerly” novel (in the terms Barthes elaborates in *S/Z*),⁴⁶ which compels the reader into active engagement, which makes the reader an agent of historical meaning, is replaced by a “readerly” one, in which all that is required is passive consumption. Readerly texts, one must recall, are always in the service of the status quo” (Titlestad & Polatinsky, 2010: 269).

But this assumption that crime fiction is an essentially passive, conservative medium appears unfounded. Most academic criticism of popular fiction as opposed to literary fiction is focused on the aesthetics of the text rather than the ways in which texts are actually read. The South African (and increasingly, international as well) audience for crime fiction is wide and thus diverse. Moreover, while none of the non-fiction genres of politics, history or true crime is as large as the crime or mystery genre in terms of sales, there is a significant overlap in terms of audience. This may imply that readers seek thrillers not only for their escapist value, but also for the social commentary now inherent in the genre. In this regard, De Kock (2011) remarks on the “economy of prestige” in which writing operates, and says that “A lot of people who are sympathetic to crime-fiction feel that it is underrated, that it is regarded as ‘genre’, and a kind of schlock, when it actually does more. Crime-fiction allows you to traverse society across and down.” As Janice Radway has shown for another commonly derided form of popular literature, the romance, readers engage with these genres at a variety of levels. Thus, “the reader of popular fiction is actively involved in the making of him- or herself...” (McCracken, 1998: 17).

Thus, although an elite notion of what is 'genre fiction' and what is 'literary fiction' going back to the Cronje Report and finding its roots in Leavisite thinking, and a concern with what has high or low symbolic capital, as opposed to economic capital, remains common, we argue that in the South African context, this opposition is redundant. It is redundant because the political and the aesthetic are always entangled. Because readers make their own meaning. And because popular literary genres have a particularly important role to play in fleshing out the critical discourses that underpin a democratic society.

5. Conclusion

The local "explosion" in crime fiction since 1994 may also be related to the boom in crime writing worldwide, in terms of both numbers and range of titles. Crime as a genre is extremely commercially successful and has been able to cross-pollinate between formats, with book series feeding into other formats, such as television series and films, and vice versa. Crime fiction is now "one of the most visible and popular kinds of literature today" (Bell and Daldry, 1990: ix). Although this development in various formats and media has yet to occur in South Africa, in terms of literature, the upsurge continues, as may be seen in the latest Meyer offering, *Kobra*.

We have argued that South African crime fiction cannot be dismissed as just sensationalist, escapist, marketable entertainment limited by generic conventions. On the contrary, we believe that because of its diverse appeal, accessibility due to genre conventions, and hermeneutic capacity, the South African crime novel collapses the boundaries between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow', and that it is indeed credibly representative of a turbulent and crime-ridden society, and a relevant means to interrogate a rapidly changing democracy. Moreover, its critique of post-apartheid South African society and politics promotes critical discourse and debate which is a foundational tenet of a healthy democracy. For these reasons, twenty years on since the inception of formal democracy (which coincides with the beginning of the current boom of South African crime fiction)¹³ the crime novel should be recognised as the 'new political novel' and accorded its due attention.

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¹³ See Meyer's first novel *Wie Met Vuur Speel* (Tafelberg, 1994).

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