

# Who dunnit in Southern Africa



Africa Research Institute

COUNTERPOINTS



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**Detective fiction has long been popular in Southern Africa. African writers have embraced and adapted detective narratives which have come to perform a variety of aesthetic, social and cultural functions. Thrillers offer complex insights into how authors and readers may understand the present, and imagine the future. This is seldom recognised by journalists, academics and other commentators.**

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*By Ranka Primorac*

On an ordinary Sunday morning in 2009, in Kabulonga, a middle-class suburb of Lusaka, Zambia, Senior Pastor Bruce Msidi is preaching to a congregation of some two hundred Pentecostal Christians. With customary eloquence and drive, he urges his listeners to study the word of God. He tells them never to give up in the face of life's difficulties. He encourages them with stories of ordinary people who have overcome adversity. And then he announces that they must all become detectives. In approaching the mystery of God's design, they should emulate the watchful attitude of an investigator in an Agatha Christie novel. The worshippers nod and murmur their assent.

During the colonial era, African readers throughout the continent enjoyed and absorbed imported novels by Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, James Hadley Chase and others. Local writers have used their imagination and creativity to appropriate and adapt detective story conventions. Formulaic narratives of murder and its prevention, of crime and its containment, were adopted into local cultures. Often rendered in local languages, detective stories are no longer perceived as foreign or "European". They have long been part and parcel of how modern Africans make sense of their worlds. Instead of mentioning Agatha Christie, Pastor Bruce could easily have invoked the name of one of a number of writers born in Southern Africa.

In Lusaka's upmarket Arcades shopping centre, a short car ride away from Pastor Bruce's Kabulonga church, author Grieve Sibale occasionally drops in at Planet Books to check on sales of his books. One of the fifty-something-year-old author's publications – *Murder in the Forest*<sup>1</sup> – is a scathing critique of social and political corruption in Zambia. After publication in the late 1990s, it attracted praise for being “an intricately-woven artistic account unravelling the weft and warp of a nation in flux”.<sup>2</sup>

Across town, in the less salubrious Northmeads shopping mall, novelist and bookshop owner Malama Katulwende grows effusive as he describes his admiration for Stephen Mpashi. A virtuoso stylist in his native Bemba, in the colonial era Mpashi wrote much-loved moralistic tales which included several narratives of detection. It should not be assumed that all Southern African crime writers are male. *The Screaming of the Innocent*,<sup>3</sup> which deals with the sensitive topic of ritual murders in contemporary Botswana, is the work of prominent lawyer and human rights activist Unity Dow. South African Angela Makholwa penned *Red Ink*,<sup>4</sup> about the danger posed to a young woman entrepreneur in Johannesburg by an imprisoned male serial killer.

**Detective stories have long been part and parcel of how modern Africans make sense of their worlds.**

Thrillers are crime stories that involve a threat to a community. The protagonist, usually an investigator, seeks to thwart the danger.<sup>5</sup> As political rhetoric usually casts ruling elites as the defenders of citizens to whom they are responsible, thrillers are able to express complex insights and propositions relating to national communities and the future.<sup>6</sup> In a sense, the standard phrase associated with thrillers – “whodunnit?” – becomes a question about social and political responsibility and ethics.

<sup>1</sup> Grieve Sibale, *Murder in the Forest*, Tupelo Honey Industries, Lusaka, Zambia, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Moyo, review of *Murder in the Forest*, in *Profit*, Lusaka, February 1999, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Unity Dow, *The Screaming of the Innocent*, Spinifex, Melbourne, Australia, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Angela Makholwa, *Red Ink*, Pan Macmillan, Northlands, South Africa, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, Arnold, London, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991.

For readers in southern Africa, as elsewhere, thrillers perform various functions. They can be a source of entertainment, aesthetic enjoyment, or intellectual and emotional stimulation. But they also stimulate debate. When thrillers from contemporary Southern Africa are read comparatively, it can be seen that individual texts are participating in a public dialogue concerning the future of democracy, citizenship and nationhood in the region. This dialogue has attracted insufficient attention, even though it may be helping to fashion new kinds of aesthetic, social and political awareness in the region.

In this *Counterpoint*, I offer short readings of four English-language thrillers preoccupied with crime and detection in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana. These novels adopt different ethical and political positions. They emerged from different systems of book production and dissemination, and have had varied degrees of recognition and prestige conferred upon them. But they are all, in their own way, strongly committed to envisaging the future well-being of Southern African nations and their inhabitants.

### **The historic gun**

In 1999, the year Thabo Mbeki became president of South Africa, crime writer Deon Meyer published the English translation of his novel *Feniks*, written in Afrikaans shortly after the country's first democratic elections with universal adult suffrage in 1994. The title of the translation, *Dead Before Dying*,<sup>7</sup> is a reference to the mental state of the protagonist when the story opens. Detective Mat Joubert is depressed, chain-smoking and overweight. He is still mourning the death of his policewoman wife.

The crime confronting Joubert involves a series of murders of white men in the Cape Town area. His task is further complicated by the fact that his new boss is a political appointee, a white member of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) who is unfamiliar with the day-to-day realities of Cape Town's streets.

Colonel Bart de Wit. Appointed by the Minister of Law and Order. The new black Minister of Law and Order. As from

<sup>7</sup> Deon Meyer, *Feniks*, Cape Town, Human & Housseau, 2008 [1996]; *Dead Before Dying*, trans. Madeleine van Biljon, Hodder, London, 1999.

January 1 Murder and Robbery were officially part of the New South Africa. Because Bart de Wit was a former member of the African National Congress who had resigned his membership before accepting the command. Because a cop must be impartial.<sup>8</sup>

In many respects, this is standard crime thriller territory: lone investigator clashes with institution-bound, bureaucratically-minded senior. But Meyer's faithfulness to the conventions of his genre entails an ambitious cultural project, which underpins all of his novels to date.<sup>9</sup> Meyer, whose work has been translated into 27 languages, seeks to rehabilitate the Afrikaans language and culture from their legacy of complicity with apartheid.

The murder weapon in *Dead Before Dying* – an antique, German-produced Mauser handgun of the type carried by Afrikaner officers in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902 – is heavily loaded with cultural significance. The Afrikaners, or “Boers”, lost the war. But their politicians later became the architects of the apartheid state in South Africa. In Meyer's novel, the gun is not a symbol of white supremacist nationalism. *Dead Before Dying* explicitly repudiates all forms of racial discrimination. Instead, the Mauser, whose physical beauty and mechanical intricacy the novel celebrates, is a symbol of the resilience, imagination and flexibility of the Boer *kommandos* which so impressed their wartime opponents. These are the traits that Meyer's white Afrikaner detective comes to exemplify, and the tools for bringing about national cultural rebirth.

Mat Joubert solves the crime by learning how to open himself up to others through dialogue, across the many barriers that divide South African society. By the end, the detective is no longer “the lone hero”. The final step of the investigation is performed by a team of police officers, including the previously unpopular Bart de Wit. Together, they discover that the “Mauser murderer” is neither a right wing Afrikaner nor a man, as had been suspected due to the gun's size and forceful recoil. The criminal turns out to be a frail, traumatised young woman exacting revenge for a savage gang rape which left her HIV positive on the eve of majority rule. *Dead Before Dying* is an emphatic warning against cultural stereotyping.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.deonmeyer.com>

In Deon Meyer's fiction, "truth and reconciliation" does not involve a staged spectacle or an institution. It is, rather, the function of persistent and dialogic re-fashioning of selves over time. In a nation still deeply entangled with the consequences of its own violent past, there can be no "clean" solutions. *Dead Before Dying* tells the story of a messy and difficult group effort, aimed at preventing past crimes from recurring.

## **“Dead Before Dying is an emphatic warning against cultural stereotyping.”**

### **The eye of the nation**

If Deon Meyer's novel about post-apartheid South Africa insists on the intense vulnerability of its traumatised hero, Zimbabwean secondary school teacher Rodwell Machingauta's *Detective Ridgemore Riva*<sup>10</sup> does precisely the opposite. Ridgemore Riva – whose surname means "trap" in Shona – is a diminutive government employee with no weaknesses or emotional scars. Riva is "a man of the people", and models himself on the "freedom fighters" who secured Zimbabwe's independence. He lives in a former colonial ghetto, eats the local staple "sadza with meat and vegetables",<sup>11</sup> and listens to the *Chimurenga* music of the liberation war. He is about to marry his beloved fiancée Martha, who observes traditional decorum by living with her parents until the wedding.

*Detective Ridgemore Riva*, published in 1994 by a leading national publishing house, is about protecting the sovereignty of a frontline state from the malevolent incursions of apartheid-era South Africa. When important state documents are stolen from the ministry of transport, Riva picks up the case. Like Mat Joubert in *Dead Before Dying*, Riva is aided by a faithful team. Unlike Joubert, Riva has an acute distrust of language. He conducts his investigation almost entirely silently, identifying the guilty simply by looking them over. Riva has none of Joubert's difficulty in

<sup>10</sup> Rodwell M. Machingauta, *Detective Ridgemore Riva*, Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.



Deon Meyer, by Ranka Primorac



Stephen Mpashi at his typewriter.

distinguishing appearances from the truth. He protects the sovereignty of Zimbabwe by being the ever-vigilant official observer, the eternally open eye of the nation.

*Detective Ridgemore Riva* is a novel about constant surveillance, perfectly executed. Riva's world is transparent to patriotic professionals. He wonders "why photographs of all citizens of Zimbabwe as well as duplicates of their identity cards were not yet in the library".<sup>12</sup> Over a decade after publication of the novel, Zimbabwe's ruling party seemingly granted Riva's wish when it produced a pamphlet identifying all public figures officially categorised as "traitors".<sup>13</sup>

This is just one of several disconcerting ways in which Machingauta's novel anticipated the violent "patriotic" nationalism propagated by Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party in the 2000s. "Patriotic history" is a narrative that seeks, among other things, to sustain a contrived image of a Zimbabwean nation permanently under attack from "imperialist forces".<sup>14</sup> There are constant reminders that the enemy can never be defeated. A strong distinction is drawn between "patriots" and "sell-outs". *Detective Ridgemore Riva* demonstrates that patriotic history has cultural antecedents.

The most unnerving aspect of this novel is its attitude to the rule of law. Riva's team kills dozens of people. Long sections describe in considerable detail the way in which secret agent Katsande – Riva's assistant – tortures crime suspects. Katsande delivers several invectives against the legal state: "Damn the bloody fucken law," Katsande said. "At times I wonder whether some of our laws were not imposed on us to please certain organizations or outside countries".<sup>15</sup> Detective Riva and his agents do not seek to prevent crime in the name of the law, but in spite of it. Although the novel does not say so outright, the nation-state these men so zealously defend is a dictatorship.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.137.

<sup>13</sup> See *Traitors Do Much Damage to National Goals*, The Department of Information and Publicity, ZANU-PF HQ, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> See Blessing-Miles Tendi, *How Intellectuals Made History in Zimbabwe*, Africa Research Institute, London, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Rodwell M. Machingauta, *Detective Ridgemore Riva*, p.158.

## Detection and citizenship

Both Mat Joubert and Ridgemore Riva are professionals, specialists at detection. *Dead Ends*,<sup>16</sup> a novel self-published by Zambian medical academic Sekelani S. Banda in 2000, is a story of a bank heist investigation. Four synchronised bank robberies in central Lusaka pose a threat to the very fabric of Zambian society, and the investigation leads to the discovery of a criminal cartel with links far beyond the city. But it also contains a more unusual narrative about how the dividing line between detectives and ordinary citizens – amateurs – can become blurred.

**Herein lies *Dead Ends*' striking contribution to contemporary debates about democracy, citizenship and governance in Southern Africa**

*Dead Ends* was published during the presidency of the late Frederick Chiluba, who promised Zambians a much-needed respite from the unbridled corruption of Kenneth Kaunda's one-party rule. Two years after the novel's publication Chiluba was himself voted out of power amid widespread accusations of corruption. *Detective Ridgemore Riva* imagines the nation as being in need of protection from external dangers. In *Dead Ends*, the threat to the nation's well-being emanates from a web of patronage and corruption that links the criminal underworld with the nation's political leadership.

Police inspector Mumbi Chabala and his trusty aide Hansweel Banda are the investigators in *Dead Ends*. In contrast to Ridgemore Riva, these detectives are described as cosmopolitan "citizens of the world" as well as patriotic Zambians. Chabala was "educated in Kalulushi, London and Manchester", the reader is informed, while Banda trained in Lusaka and at "the Scottish Police College which was established at Tulliallan Castle in 1990".<sup>17</sup> When they discover that the Minister for Home Security is implicated in the "Lusaka Syndicate", the international criminal organisation responsible for the bank robberies, the investigation is called off and Chabala is forced to leave his job in disgrace.

<sup>16</sup> Sekelani S. Banda, *Dead Ends: Crime, Cops & a Renaissance*, S & P, Lusaka, Zambia, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

Junior detective Hansweel Banda saves the day, but not by conventional thriller means. Early on in the novel, Banda departs from prescribed police behaviour by starting to attend lectures organised by an opposition party, Honest Patriotic Envoys, or HOPE. The lectures are reproduced in full in the novel. In calling for liberal transparency, political dialogue, meritocracy, gender equality and a cultivation of civic virtues, they offer a damning critique of Chiluba's Zambia. In the end, when all seems lost, it is with the help of Hansweel Banda's HOPE contacts that Chabala is able to incriminate the high-ranking politicians implicated in the heists.

After the case has been solved, Hansweel Banda decides to leave the police force and become an opposition party politician. "The problem with this country," Banda tells his surprised boss, "is that professionals shun politics".<sup>18</sup> In *Dead Ends*, the best detective is one who is able to transfer his skills into the realm of politics.

In a discussion of citizen efficacy – the ability of ordinary people to influence the democratic process – social theorist Charles Taylor links this ability to the images and stories through which people imagine their social worlds.<sup>19</sup> In *Dead Ends*, concepts of good governance connect with the popular and widely-understood image of a detective. In order to be an efficacious citizen, one must become a detective, or vice versa. Like Mat Joubert, Hansweel Banda understands the difficulties ahead – but refuses to give up hope. Herein lies *Dead Ends* striking contribution to contemporary debates about democracy, citizenship and governance in Southern Africa.

## **A good country**

The novels by Deon Meyer, Rodwell Machingauta and Sekelani Banda concern crimes which involve violence and death. The investigation of crime and detection of culprits is demanding. But for Precious Ramotswe, the "lady detective" of Alexander McCall Smith's internationally-acclaimed series set in Botswana, the business of detection is less exacting and the crimes

are – for the most part – less fraught with danger. Mma Ramotswe’s tools are her attentiveness and intuition. She solves mysteries with a curious kind of knowingness. At every turn, she simply knows what to do next.

In *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*,<sup>20</sup> the first novel in the series, Mma Ramotswe resolves nine cases involving a family impostor, accounting fraud, a missing husband, a wayward teenager, a stolen car, a cheating husband, a false industrial claim, a workplace impostor and a missing child. The process of detection involves neither the rational analysis of evidence, nor physical struggle. It is mostly a matter of personal intervention, as it is – paradoxically – for Ridgemore Riva, who also operates outside the law. In Riva’s case, this is because he inhabits a society constantly threatened by conflict – that is to say, war. In Mma Ramotswe’s, because the public conflict she encounters is mostly private. The worlds of both detectives are transparent. In both novels, in contrast to those by Deon Meyer and Sekelani Banda, an absence of change is represented as a social and national ideal.

Like other novels in this *Counterpoint*, this thriller displays a certain kind of national pedagogy. A key aspect of this lies in the relationship between the detective and the nation. In *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, Botswana’s status as “the best-run state in Africa”<sup>21</sup> is consistently extolled, and never questioned. While male detectives created by Meyer, Machingauta and Banda function as guardians, defenders and leaders of their nations, McCall Smith’s heroine, both as a woman and a detective, comes to embody all that is good about her nation. The novel underscores this at the very beginning: “She is a good detective, and a good woman. A good woman in a good country, one might say”.<sup>22</sup>

Precious Ramotswe is also, as the novel repeatedly points out, “a modern lady”.<sup>23</sup> The only episode in the text where this idealised modernity – and the image of Botswana as a modern nation and “a place of peace”<sup>24</sup> – comes close to being destabilised is in the case of the missing village boy, whose abduction is a case of

<sup>20</sup> Alexander McCall Smith, *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, Abacus, London, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102.

witchcraft. “This was evil incarnate”,<sup>25</sup> thinks Mma Ramotswe as she hunts down the “witchdoctor” who has abducted the boy. In Unity Dow’s *The Screaming of the Innocent*, mentioned at the start of this *Counterpoint*, the responsibility for ritual murders is laid squarely at the door of the nation’s middle-class patriarchal elites, and the crimes are presented as a deeply-rooted internal threat to national life. In *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, the malefactor turns out to be an immigrant from South Africa – an outsider. Furthermore, when Mma Ramotswe finds the abducted boy he is still alive. No irreparable damage has been done, and there is no reason to trouble the law.

*The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* narrates only the impenetrable and irrational “goodness” of Botswana, represented in the text’s final pages by an image of an African woman whose body merges with the landscape of a continent. At the novel’s end, Mma Ramotswe’s future husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, looks at her and sees

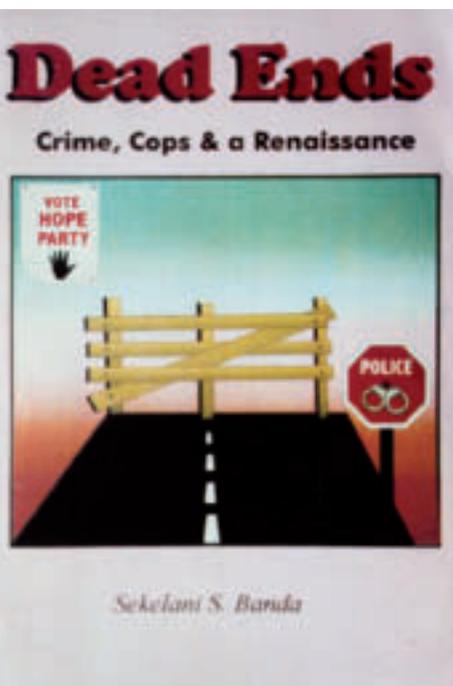
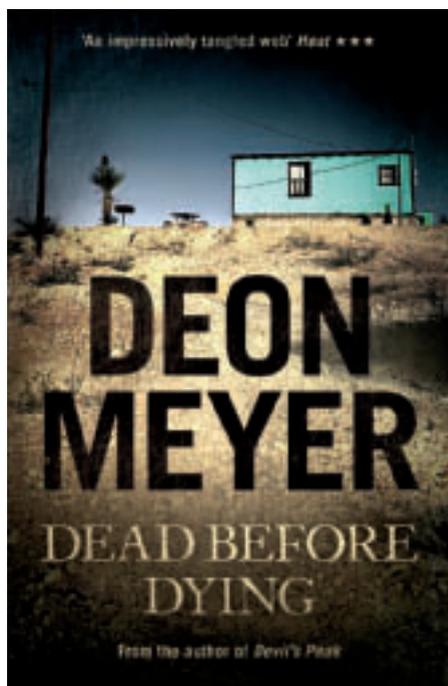
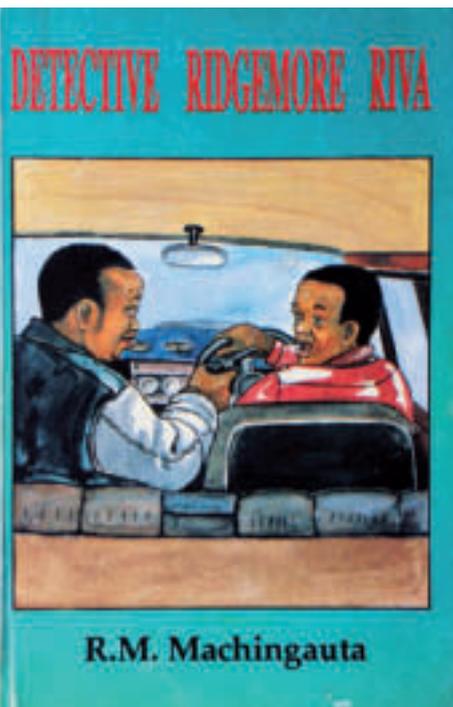
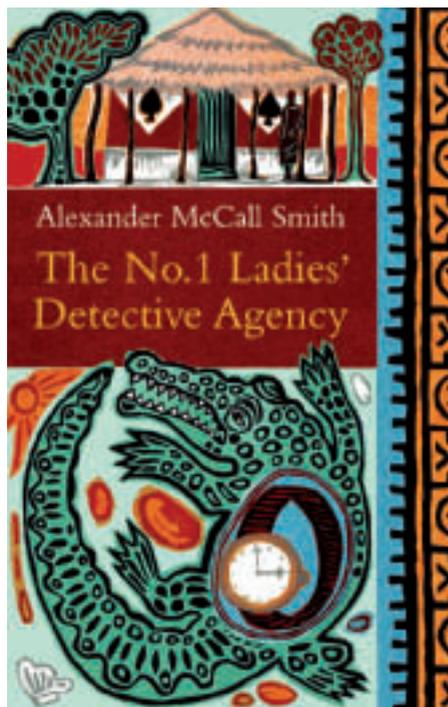
[M]other, Africa, wisdom, understanding, good things to eat, pumpkins, chicken, the smell of sweet cattle breath, the white sky across the endless, endless bush, and the giraffe that cried, giving its tears for women to daub on their baskets; O Botswana, my country, my place.<sup>26</sup>

This soothing, memorable image has attracted many admirers. *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* has been translated into more than 30 languages. In contrast to the other novels it makes life, detection and crime in Southern Africa appear almost entirely uncomplicated. In this way, McCall Smith’s novel joins the other texts in the *Counterpoint* by engaging imaginatively with notions of tradition, revolution, reform, progress and starting anew. Although none provide straightforward answers, all ask questions to which researchers and general readers alike would do well to pay more heed.

12 <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.221.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.232.



## **The Author**

Ranka Primorac is a Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Southampton. She is author of *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics of Modern Zimbabwe* (I. B. Tauris, 2006).

## **Africa Research Institute**

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