Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing
Leon de Kock
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If you look at key debates in South African literary studies over the past few decades, you will often find Leon de Kock at the middle of them—passionately, bluntly, and with considerable theoretical sophistication making his case about where the field is now and where it should be heading. His most recent book, *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing* is no exception, bringing together some of his incisive recent criticism about the disillusionment of the postapartheid period under the organizing concept of "plot loss" (3). As De Kock argues, the state's pursuit of neoliberal economics, combined with "a new racial exclusivism," have produced a sense of "disorientation" in postapartheid literary culture, and indeed in the culture at large (3-4). The narrative of the rainbow nation has gone off the rails, even as "contending regimes of information and legitimation" have obscured the social context that has produced this failure (4).

> Such wayward, hard-to-read social conditions require exacting and forensic examination, which is what crime writing sets out to do, holding up to the light South Africa's reconstituted public sphere and finding it riddled with symptoms of criminal pathology. (Ibid.)

In short, this period of willful social disorder, in which the clearer Apartheid-era boundaries between good and evil have become increasingly occluded, and the state itself increasingly a locus of criminality, has provided the ideal conditions for works of "social detection" (Ibid.). These texts, which are predominantly but not entirely nonfictional, seek to "capture the perverse details of plot loss in [their] search for representational adequation of actual, lived conditions" (8).

While the texts in de Kock's study emerge from the post-transition period, he rightly notes that the nonfictional impulse toward truth-telling has its roots in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). De Kock cites Njabulo Ndebele's claim that narrative's "power of reflection," "experienced as a shared social consciousness," has been the "lasting legacy of the stories of the TRC" (16). Along with the emphases on public narration of the truth, and the construction of what Jonny Steinberg calls "a viable language of the self" after the dehumanization of Apartheid (28), has come an upsurge in memoir, autobiographical writing, true crime, and creative nonfiction. The key difference, however, between the transitional period and the contemporary moment of De Kock's study is that while earlier texts evidenced some faith in the healing or reconstructive possibilities of truth telling, the contemporary texts are far less sure of the

consequences of their narratives. If national politicians and local police alike have proven corrupt and immune to truth-telling, who are the good guys now?

It is precisely the turn to genre formulas like crime fiction, de Kock explains, that has led many literary critics to decry contemporary South African writers for selling out and dumbing down the great political literature of the Apartheid era (35). Rather than condemning the shift to genre fiction, de Kock asks a much more interesting question: "What if the upsurge in South African 'crime writing,' in all its forms, rather than selling out on intricate 'entanglement' . . . is in fact prising open the workings of a genuinely transformed social condition?" (36). Part of this transformation, as I have already mentioned, is a much hazier sense of what constitutes goodness, and this is the focus of de Kock's second chapter. The quest to find, and define, the "virtuous individual" becomes a central preoccupation for this writing, as de Kock explores through an extended discussion of Deon Meyer's 2003 novel *Heart of the Hunter*. In its dramatization of how to interpret the politics of Meyer's protagonist, Xhosa former MK soldier Thobela Mpayipheli, the novel functions, according to de Kock, as a "form of social hermeneutics" aimed at identifying what constitutes good or bad difference now that the equation of goodness with anti-apartheid struggle has become unstable (56).

For white writers, these fears and disillusionments have been overwhelmingly expressed as paranoia about becoming victims in the much-touted explosion of violent crime post-transition. White anxiety about crime has become a coded language through which to express unease about the new dispensation without being subjected to allegations of racism (62). In texts such as Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying*, Antjie Krog's *Begging to be Black*, and Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands*, which are the focus of Chapter Three, this "accelerating sense of personal threat" combines with "an abiding sense of not belonging" (65), of a temporal and spatial dislocation in which one has "become a stranger in one's own time and place" (66). The perennial trope of the frontier returns in these texts as white writers gather evidence about their defamiliarized home, manifesting a kind of "reality hunger" in their relentless questioning of whether the mythology of transition has taken the country somewhere new or trapped them in a perpetual state of future anterior, a will-have-been transition that cannot be realized (77). There is a certain dreary solipsism to many of these white narratives about the unhomeliness of apartheid and its aftermath, which Ashraf Jamal refreshingly sums up thus: "It is as though South African culture, through the works of figures such as [Coetzee and Kentridge], appears dead on arrival; as though all that was possible was the mirroring of our sorry morbidity" (93).

De Kock briefly reflects in Chapter Five on the ways in which this inward turn in white literary fiction manifests a degree of "struggle fatigue," where the corruption and disorder of the contemporary period have led to a loss of the plot of national liberation associated with 1994 (104-105). The "diagnostic turn" enabled by crime writing provides a

way past this sense of hopeless derailment and disorientation (Ibid.). The final few chapters of the book offer exemplars of both fictional and nonfictional texts that adopt this diagnostic mode. De Kock uses Roger Smith's *Wake Up Dead* and *Mixed Blood*, as well as Angela Makholwa's *Black Widow Society* to explore the uptake of noir genre conventions, as well as nonfictional crime narratives by Antony Altbeker and Mandy Wiener. Here we get a sense of the ambivalence about genre that emerges at times in de Kock's study. On the one hand, all of these texts are offered as examples of a forensic mode of writing focused on exposing and diagnosing the criminal underbelly of contemporary South African society. On the other hand, the chapter unquestioningly asserts the superiority of the nonfictional works in statements like the following: "The pathologies are far too pressing to leave to genre stylists alone, or indeed to the practitioners of 'literary' fiction" (117). Thus, while he earlier held out the promise of taking the scholarly conversation beyond a simple condemnation of genre writing as giving up and/or selling out, at times he seems to uncritically accede to that argument.

That said, the book's most important contributions come from his discussion of the salience of nonfiction for a "wound culture" (Seltzer) in which the digital circulation and mass consumption of images of the broken body have become the dominant mode through which people feel an affective connection to the public sphere (136). In de Kock's readings of Niren Tolsi and Paul Botes's newspaper coverage and Greg Marinovich's photojournalism about the 2012 Marikana massacre, "Marikana and its various retellings gesture towards the social importance of public forms of truth-telling over and above the broad, encompassing genre of fiction." He goes on to argue that "[t]he dramatic contests of truth and falsity vis-à-vis perceived life-and-death questions, relayed via a hypermediated wound culture, have in an important sense begun to resituate the culture of writing in the postapartheid context" (165). While de Kock's final chapter holds up Ivan Vladisavic, Lauren Beukes, and others as examples of fiction writers whose work resonates with and draws on nonfictional modes of truth-telling, this sophisticated reading of the hunger for, even the necessity of, nonfiction in a corrupt and violence-addicted new media context is especially compelling and relevant.