

FORUM KRITIKA: THE SOUTH AFRICAN NOVEL IN TRANSITION: 1990-2010

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT: REFLECTIONS ON "FORM" IN RECENT SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION

Chris Thurman
University of the Witwatersrand
christopher.thurman@wits.ac.za

Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point not those aspects of "form" associated with "formalist" criticism—structure, prose style, figurative language, or other aesthetic elements—but rather the more mundane consideration of length and the related matter of genre. This is a deliberately literal (rather than literary) interpretation of "form": what does a book look and feel like when held in the reader's hand? What reader expectations are aroused? From the answers to these questions can be discerned certain trends in recent (post-apartheid/transitional) fiction—or, more specifically, in writing and publishing practices.

In 2004, Michael Chapman identified the short story as the literary form most suited to prevailing conditions in South Africa. At the time, however, short fiction remained for the most part confined to small magazines and journals; multi-author anthologies appeared occasionally, but single-author collections were rare indeed. 2010, however, seemed to mark a resurgence of sorts: Ivan Vladislavic's short stories (first collected in 1989 and 1996) were republished under the title *Flashback Hotel*, while Henrietta Rose-Innes's *Homing* appeared along with Arja Salafranca's *The Thin Line* and David Medalie's *The Mistress's Dog: Stories 1996-2010*. This conjunction suggests not so much an indication of renewed "writerly" interest in short fiction but regained publisher confidence in the commercial viability of the form. Michael Titlestad, in an Afterword to Medalie's book, suggests that the ("modernist") short story "might be particularly suited to our present" insofar as it leaves both "characters and readers on the brink of a recognition that remains ... somewhat inchoate, just out of reach ... this hesitation, this modest authorial purview, seems entirely apt."

Keywords

long short fiction, mezzanine writing, short fiction sensibility

About the author

Chris Thurman is Senior Lecturer in the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand. He is the editor of the journal *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* and compiler of *Sport Versus Art: A South African Contest* (Wits UP, 2010). His other book publications include the monograph *Guy Butler: Reassessing a South African Literary Life* (U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2010) and *Text Bites*, a literary anthology for high schools (Oxford UP, 2009). He contributes to various publications as an art critic, political commentator, and travel writer, and has been awarded the English Academy of Southern Africa's Thomas Pringle prize for reviews. His collection of journalistic essays *At Large: Reviewing the Arts in South Africa* will be published by Common Ground in 2012.

The word "form" in the title of this article is (not deliberately, but nonetheless usefully) misleading. While addressing matters of structure, I am not concerned here with additional aspects

of form associated with “formalist” criticism: prose style, figurative language, or other aesthetic elements. Rather, I will focus on more mundane—perhaps even crude—considerations based on a literal, rather than literary, interpretation of “form”: what does a book look and feel like when held in the reader’s hand? Setting aside cover design, how are certain reader expectations aroused by the shape and size (the implicit “length”) of a book? From the answers to these questions, I will suggest, can be discerned certain trends in recent (post-apartheid/post-transitional)¹ fiction – that is, in both writing and publishing practices.

In 2004, Michael Chapman identified the short story as the literary form most suited to prevailing socio-economic conditions in South Africa (1-15). Over the previous decade, however, short fiction had for the most part been confined to small magazines and journals; multi-author anthologies appeared occasionally, but single-author collections were rare. Four years later, Arja Salafranca declared a “renaissance of the genre in South Africa,” citing collections of short stories and “flash fiction” published in 2008 by Zoe Wicomb, Liesl Jobson, and Allan Kolski Horwitz along with a handful of anthologies (19). This resurgence seemed to be confirmed in 2010: Ivan Vladislavic’s seminal short stories (first collected in 1989 and 1996) were republished under the title *Flashback Hotel*, while Henrietta Rose-Innes’s *Homing* appeared along with Salafranca’s own *The Thin Line* and David Medalie’s *The Mistress’s Dog*. 2011 has seen the publication of more anthologies—such as Salafranca’s compilation *The Edge of Things*—and a campaign celebrating the winter solstice, 21 June, as South Africa’s National Short Story Day.

All of this appears to indicate not so much a renewed “writerly” interest in short fiction as a regained publisher confidence in the commercial viability, the marketability, of the form. (This confidence, in turn, is linked to the willingness of major book retailers to stock and display publications of short fiction on their shelves or online). If that is the case, and if it is not simply inevitable that longer and more diverse publishers’ lists are likely to include the odd short fiction title, then it is worth applying the language of economics and considering the external factors that have facilitated growth in the South African market for this particular product. That is to say, without undermining the role of those authors, editors, and publishers who have shown initiative in promoting the short story as a genre, we should pause to reflect on socio-political and material changes precipitating a change in public appetite or “demand”—if, indeed, there has been a change.

An obvious starting point is online culture and the pervasive influence of digitization. The sociological effects of digital technology in South Africa are not as marked as in developed countries—or, at least, they are differently marked—simply because the majority of South Africans still have limited access to new technologies. Low levels of literacy (prior to levels of “literary”

interest) are a more acute source of anxiety to authors and publishers alike than the print-versus-electronic media dilemma. Yet the demographic that constitutes the book-buying public in South Africa—delimited by income, as books are still an overpriced “luxury” item in the country²—is, by global standards, reasonably tech-savvy and entrenched in the cultures and practices of the digital era. As internet browsing and multimedia technologies inculcate fundamentally different reading habits, could it be that the short form is suited to shorter attention spans? Consider Sam Harris’s admission that (not as a writer-producer, but as a reader-consumer) the plethora of print and online texts daily competing for his attention forces him to consider the “opportunity cost” of committing to a longer work:

When shopping for books, I’ve suddenly become acutely sensitive to the opportunity costs of reading any one of them. If your book is 600 pages long, you are demanding more of my time than I feel free to give. And if I could accomplish the same change in my view of the world by reading a 60-page version of your argument, why didn’t you just publish a book this length instead?

The honest answer to this last question should disappoint everyone: Publishers can’t charge enough money for 60-page books to survive; thus, writers can’t make a living by writing them. But readers are beginning to feel that this shouldn’t be their problem. Worse, many readers believe that they can just jump on YouTube and watch the author speak at a conference, or skim his blog, and they will have absorbed most of what he has to say on a given subject. In some cases this is true and suggests an enduring problem for the business of publishing. In other cases it clearly isn’t true and suggests an enduring problem for our intellectual life.

Here, of course, Harris has nonfiction in mind. What about fiction? As a writer of both novels and short stories, Henrietta Rose-Innes still discerns the “ascendance” of the novel. Noting that the “opportunity for escapism” is primarily what readers of fiction seek, Rose-Innes affirms: “A novel can take the reader away and immerse them in an imaginary universe for an extended period of time, whereas the short story, with its spare, often stylized slice of experience, is perhaps not as good a vehicle for that kind of transport” (qtd. in Awerbuck 14). The nature of the escapist experiences promised by different literary forms—or by different ways of “packaging” literature—is a point to which I shall return when discussing divisions between fiction/nonfiction and literary fiction/genre fiction.

If neither economic nor technological changes are sufficient to explain the apparent renewed popularity (or “appropriateness”) of the short story in South Africa, an alternative literary-

sociological insight is required, such as Michael Titlestad's intriguing suggestion in his "Afterword" to Medalie's *The Mistress's Dog*. Titlestad draws a distinction between the "modernist short story," which he proposes "might be particularly suited to our present," and the "other modes of the short story" that were "appropriate to our past" (189). The latter modes, it is implied, render an expansive exterior world (in "novelistic" fashion?) towards a particular political purpose; they paint the spectacular, to borrow Njabulo Ndebele's well-known characterization of an apartheid-era literature needing to "rediscover the ordinary" (37). By contrast, the best modernist short stories—Titlestad mentions the works of Joyce, Conrad, Woolf, and Forster as precursors to the kind of fiction a writer such as Medalie produces—are "never pedantic":

they never resolve the matters they raise, but rather leave both their characters and readers on the brink of a recognition that remains—for all of its powerful implications—somewhat inchoate, just out of reach. In a transitional context like ours, in which most of us experience the world as difficult to read, this hesitation, this modest authorial purview, seems entirely apt. (190)

As Titlestad notes, the incomplete South African transition (away from apartheid but towards an unknown future) leaves the country's citizens "caught up in a world of contradictions and ironies ... the actual struggle we have to engage is to find a unifying purpose in a world of complexity and difference" (189). While this is not sufficient to make a case for South African exceptionalism (on the contrary, it "makes South Africans' lives much like those lived elsewhere by everyone"), it does reflect a "mezzanine ontology" (188) that is specific to South Africa:

our mezzanine is distinctly our own: the world we have left below and the one above us, the lived experience of which we cannot yet discern, are fundamentally local, even as we come to acknowledge that they are simultaneously transnational and translatable.

This seeming contradiction—that our habitus is both overwhelmingly distinct and distinctly shared—remains key to understanding what it means to live and write as a South African. There is much that only those who have shared our awful history will understand, but it is incumbent on us to communicate, from that particularity, a condition of suspension that is common to many people in diverse contexts. (Titlestad 189)

Titlestad's use of an architectural metaphor is apt. He adopts and inverts the figurative value of the "mezzanine" from "Crowd Control," one of the stories in Medalie's collection, in which

the protagonist faces an internal conflict between an intellectual and emotionally neutral response to events (“a level within himself where there was pragmatism and common sense—a sort of mezzanine level, full of light and plastic plants” [Medalie 57]) and an irrational, neurotic, but more powerfully felt response “at another level, deep in the basement of his heart” (Medalie 57) or in “the murkier regions where his fear lay” (Medalie 59).

In Titlestad’s adaptation, the mezzanine is not ordered but chaotic, not stable but in flux, not assured but bewildered. It is the post-1994 equivalent of the “interregnum,” that Gramscian notion which has so frequently been invoked to capture the historical moment when apartheid was dying-but-not-dead. Titlestad correctly observes that the consequent pressure on South African authors “to put their shoulders to the wheel of history” was still felt in the early years of democratic government—but that, increasingly, authors have rejected this “teleological rumbling forward”; their lives are “caught in-between” old and new even as they face “the uncertainties of the future” (188). To write from the mezzanine (or of the mezzanine) is, then, to eschew polemic activism and “intervention”; it is to refrain from grand statement or self-assured protest. (It also entails resisting a counter-urge, one that is readily observable in South African fiction, to reject the burden of political or social “responsibility” but to treat South Africa’s still-spectacular political or social problems with a kind of levity—as, it may be suggested, is potentially the case with a genre such as “the krimi” or popular crime fiction.) Instead, the mezzanine writer creates on a “smaller canvas” that “compels an author to devise situations and moments of interiority ... that distill the swirling realities of the world” (Titlestad 189).

The “smaller canvas” to which Titlestad refers is, of course, the curtailed space of the short story. I wish to apply his concept of the mezzanine beyond this genre, to recent examples of ostensibly “longer” works of fiction and novels that are clearly informed by what one might call a short fiction “sensibility.” First, however, a few words about the “modest authorial purview” described (and indeed advocated) by Titlestad.

“Modesty” has been a contentious issue in protracted (and ongoing) debates about the state of South African literature, most notably, in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper’s extended series on “writing, publishing, buying, and reading books in South Africa” and in responses to these articles.³ Darryl Accone, taking his cue from Maureen Isaacson of the *Sunday Independent*, proposed that an excess of “nurturing and buttressing” in reviews of new South African books—a dearth of “stricter, stronger, fiercer, more critical reactions”—was “hindering the development of a literary culture in this country.” His *Mail & Guardian* colleague, Percy Zvomuya, went a step further, bemoaning the practice of “friends gently stroking the backs of friends” that has resulted in too many authors

attaining “celebrity status.” Moreover, Zvomuya claimed, there are too many South African authors who are “attention-seekers,” at odds with the few “quietly working” writers who are “hungry, busy, beady-eyed romantics” and who “sit at a computer without an internet connection, write until the small hours of the morning, stare at their manuscripts and, unsatisfied, start writing again.” This caricature understandably irked many authors who are quite fond of their internet connections and who refuse to accept that being online makes them inferior or lazy writers (even if, according to Accone, “online chatter and conversation about being a writer, the ‘writerly life,’ or a writer’s miserable existence in a sports-obsessed country with low literacy rates” is “robbing writers of writing time”). The gist of Zvomuya’s article was that South African writers should read more, work on their craft more, and promote themselves less.

Given Harris’s assertion that “Writers, artists, and public intellectuals are nearing some sort of precipice” — a position in which the proliferation of online platforms makes it near-impossible for writers to earn money from their writing, because “the future of the written word is (mostly or entirely) digital” and “audiences increasingly expect digital content to be free” — one can hardly blame South African authors for using these very online platforms to grow their public profiles in the hope that this will translate into book deals and better sales. Nor can one fault writers for actively participating in online communities such as *Books LIVE* (erstwhile *BookSA*) and *LitNet*; after all, as Accone’s description of “a sports-obsessed country with low literacy rates” suggests, writers do feel marginalized, excluded and isolated, so any community, virtual or otherwise, that offers a sense of belonging and even importance is welcome. Yet here we encounter a contradiction. Writers are seen as (and are criticized for) aspiring to the image of the author-as-rockstar. At the same time, however, with very few exceptions — John van de Ruit, author of the *Spud* series, comes to mind⁴ — the general indifference to literature in South Africa means that authors *cannot* become rockstars. Writers in post-apartheid South Africa, to use Titlestad’s phrase, have a “modest purview” thrust upon them.

The diminution of the status of the writer is arguably a global postmodern phenomenon (the list of exceptions proving that rule would include J.K. Rowling and Dan Brown). It has been accompanied by the decreasing influence of literary critics and scholars, a decline detailed by John Gross in his excellent study *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*. Yet if the institutionalization of literary studies during the course of the twentieth century meant that “men of letters” gave way to “academic experts” at universities and “cultural functionaries” in the media (Gross 9), these latter-day professional men and women of letters are finding that the “democratized” online public sphere of the twenty-first century — in which blogs, user-generated content on websites and social networks seem to have acquired greater appeal than “formal” or “traditional” forums for literary criticism — no longer set as much store by the pronouncements of so-called cultural authorities.

This requires literary critics and academics to adopt the changing role that Zygmunt Bauman has identified for all would-be “public intellectuals”: a shift from “legislators” to “interpreters,” from purveyors of public aesthetic preferences and advisors on morality (and policy) to mediators between conflicting cultures and world views. Broadly, this means description rather than prescription; it leaves literary critics in an awkward position. If they have the temerity to challenge the influence of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, or to query the consensus manifested in *Amazon.com*’s best-seller lists, or, in South Africa, to infer that local literary output lacks not quantity but quality—as many of the *Mail & Guardian* series contributors did—then they are accused of elitism or arrogance in presuming to act as arbiters of literary taste.

One of the curious consequences of the *Mail & Guardian* series, and related provocations on *LitNet* and *Books LIVE*, was a reinscription of the kind of high art/low art divisions that have been collapsed, re-established, exploited, and exhaustively debated since John Dewey (in his hesitant introduction of pragmatist aesthetics) and Adorno and Horkheimer (in their theorizing of the culture industry) put Hegelian dialectics to different purposes in the 1930s. Accusing literary journalists, university academics, and other professional critics of prescriptive behavior, a number of contributors to *Books LIVE* and *LitNet*—published authors in one form or another—expressed disdain for “serious literature” and celebrated the growth of popular fiction, genre fiction, and so-called “schlock.” In the very process of opposing a perceived Leavisian/Leavisite privileging of certain texts over others, such responses—informed, perhaps, by what university publisher Veronica Klipp has called “an anti-intellectual sentiment” prevailing in the South African book industry—in fact reinforce the contested categories they seek to dismiss.

I am suggesting that precisely this categorization is made manifest in perceptions about the “length” of recent South African works of fiction: both in the creative vision of authors who see themselves as producing “long” or “short” books, and in the design, packaging, and marketing strategies of publishers who attempt to target (and accommodate) particular “types” of readers.

Let us, then, extend Titlestad’s notion of fiction that represents life in South Africa as lived on a “mezzanine level”—that is, in a “constant sense of suspense” (Thornton qtd. in Titlestad 188)—to other works that have appeared recently. How, for instance, might it be usefully applied to a “novel” such as Damon Galgut’s *In a Strange Room*, which reads as if comprised of three nonfiction novellas? Or Ivan Vladislavic’s *Double Negative*, which (also made up of three parts) is only “half” of a greater creative work, the collaboration “TJ/Double Negative” with David Goldblatt?

If literary prizes and awards are one means—however dubious—by which a writer’s literary “seriousness” is measured, then both Vladislavic and Galgut are “serious” authors (*In a*

Strange Room was short-listed for the 2010 Man Booker Prize, as was Galgut's 2003 novel *The Good Doctor*, which also won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize; *Double Negative* won the 2010 M-Net Literary Award and the University of Johannesburg Literary Award, and Vladislavic previously won Sunday Times prizes in 2002 and 2007, among other awards). Both of them have received critical acclaim, have been translated and distributed internationally, and have in some way been incorporated into the academy—scholarly articles, doctoral theses, and books⁵ have been produced on their work, which is also included on university syllabi. Both seem to insist on a “modest authorial purview”; their most recent books do not “resolve the matters they raise” (to quote Titlestad again), “but rather leave both their characters and readers on the brink of a recognition that remains ... somewhat inchoate, just out of reach.” Written about (and out of) a world that is “difficult to read,” these books are marked by “hesitation,” by a reluctance to present life in South Africa on a grand canvas. (Finally, although I have indicated that I will not analyze cover design in this article, it is nonetheless interesting to note similarities in the minimalist, monochromatic covers of the two books.)

In a Strange Room is a heavily autobiographical work and, indeed, there seems little difference between Damon, the protagonist in each of the book's three sections, and Damon Galgut, the author. The only real difference, in fact, has been brought about by the passage of time: the experiencing protagonist (whose three journeys unfold in present tense narration) is so far removed in space and time from the experienced author that there is a continual slippage between first- and third-person narrative. Damon is “he” and “I” simultaneously, an estrangement that results in some confusing sentence constructions. For instance, in the first story, “The Follower,” a conversation between Damon and his enigmatic traveling companion Reiner is recorded as follows: “What about politics, I say, we haven't looked at the human situation, we don't know what we're getting into. Reiner stares at him with bemusement, then waves a contemptuous hand” (Galgut 25). Damon is alienated, not only from the places he visits (Greece, India, and various African countries) but from his future “remembering” self. Forgetting and elision are central thematic concerns in the novel—indeed, it may be described as a novel rather than a memoir precisely because of this insistence on the unreliability of memory, the “fictitiousness” of that which is being remembered.

This self-distancing redeems what would otherwise be an indulgent work. *In a Strange Room* is, after all, an exorcism of various ghosts from Galgut's past (his obsession with the narcissistic Reiner, his sense of culpability and frustration and longing as a white homosexual man in Africa, his resentment and guilt towards a suicidal friend). It is a solipsistic, fragmented work that, despite evincing a “wonderful sense of place” (Morris), remains “modest” in its purview and small in its scale. Damon's eye sweeps across vast landscapes, and he gives voice to the bold observations and generalizations travelers are wont to make; the narrative betrays an urge to mend the fractured

relationships it presents, to provide the narrator-protagonist with a sense of belonging in at least some of its locations. Yet ultimately the landscapes are “difficult to read,” the resolution of personal relationships proves impossible, and Damon remains in a state of “suspense” as insights into the wider political worlds he visits remain “just out of reach.”

The three sections of *In a Strange Room* were first published individually in the *Paris Review* as “long” short stories or novellas and, even though there is a line of chronological continuity running through their collection in “novel” form—the second piece, “The Lover,” begins “A few years later he is wandering in Zimbabwe” (Galgut 67)—they can be read as discrete texts. In this way, the form (or short forms) of the text can be seen as apposite to the author’s exploration of a “mezzanine ontology.” Indeed, this is true of much of Galgut’s prose work (he is also a playwright). *Small Circle of Beings* (1988), his second book, is a collection of short fiction centered on a novella of that title; only two of his five other novels stretch to 200 pages.

Vladislavic’s oeuvre is more varied, yet he too has tended to avoid the typical “novel” form. Apart from the collections of short stories to which I have already alluded, he has produced a novella (*The Folly*, 1993) and has undertaken collaborations in which his role as writer is subsumed within the interplay of text and image, or the process of ekphrasis (prior to his partnership with Goldblatt, Vladislavic had written extensively with and about the artist Willem Boshoff). The two books that confirmed Vladislavic’s status as the pre-eminent writer about the city of Johannesburg, *The Exploded View* (2004) and *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and What-what* (2006) are both composite texts: the former described on the dust jacket as “a quartet of interlinked fictions,” the latter comprising 138 numbered sections that may be read in different orders based on a reader’s selection of different “keys.” In light of these fragmentary works, Vladislavic’s *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) is anomalous; although an admixture of satire and surrealism (and the inclusion of a fiction-within-the-fiction) makes this anything but a “conventional” novel, it is his only work that approximates a novel in the standard narrative mode. It is an ambitious creation, capturing numerous facets of early post-apartheid society—and, at 340 pages, it is Vladislavic’s longest work. Seven years after it was published, he suggested that he “couldn’t write a book like that now” (qtd. in Thurman); it seems that the desire to adopt a “modest authorial purview” has, for an author such as Vladislavic, become more acute as the first decade of the new millennium has progressed.

Double Negative provides evidence of the author’s doubts about the possibility, not to mention the desirability, of depicting South African society on a broad canvas. In the first section, “Available Light,” a young man is paired up with the photographer Saul Auerbach (recognizable to the reader as Goldblatt) for an afternoon. They are joined by a visiting British journalist. In one of the book’s most memorable scenes, based on an anecdote about Goldblatt, the trio climb a hill in the middle of the city and survey the houses below. Auerbach observes:

You think it would simplify things, looking down from up here ... but it has the opposite effect on me. If I try to imagine the lives going on in all these houses, the domestic dramas, the family sagas, it seems impossibly complicated. How could you ever do justice to something so rich in detail? You couldn't do it in a novel, let alone a photograph. (45)

Vladislavic's response to this dilemma is not to attempt to "do justice" to this complexity but to narrow his focus. Just as Auerbach approaches only two houses to capture on film (Neville Lister, the narrator and protagonist, selects a third—one he will revisit in the book's second section, "Dead Letters"), so Vladislavic writes about the "impossibly complicated" society around him by depicting not the spectacular contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa, but the marginal and the mundane. The grand historical/national narrative is subordinated to the personal; Neville admits, "The end of apartheid put my nose out of joint" (75).

Maps and failures in map-reading are common motifs in Vladislavic's work. Whether as flâneurs or as car drivers, Vladislavic's characters are continually locating themselves with unreliable co-ordinates on shifting axes; in *The Restless Supermarket* and *The Exploded View*, Johannesburg is presented as an organic, dynamic, fluid, shape-shifting entity. The architectural plan in *The Folly* never becomes a bricks-and-mortar house. The numbered fragments in *Portrait with Keys*, which Vladislavic himself has described as "a bit like a map that shows only the side streets" can only be navigated with textual or numerical codes that may or may not be linked to routes through the city. (Likewise, the text of *Double Negative* ostensibly remains "incomplete" unless it is read alongside Goldblatt's photographs.) It is significant, then, that the third and final part of *Double Negative* ends with a recollection of Neville's childhood ambivalence about being lost and found. In this section, we read about the cocksure young journalist/blogger, Janie, who somewhat presumptuously thinks that she knows her way around the city and can "navigate" the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa. Neville, having achieved a modicum of renown as a photographer, finds that he too has assumed this sort of familiarity: he is a "designated driver," "Neville the Navigator" (191). When he was young, Neville relates, he and his father would play a game in the car; Neville would lie down on the back seat while his father, driving a circuitous route, would ask his son to guess where they were and where they were going. "I loved the challenge," Neville tells us, but "[a] day came when I could not go wrong" (201). He knew the route they were taking, and he knew their destination, so when his father asked the customary "Where are we now, my boy?" Neville "could not answer. I lay in the dark with the bitter knowledge that I had unlearned the art of getting lost" (204).

Getting lost, I want to suggest—or rather, accepting the fact of being lost—is characteristic

of mezzanine writing (“experience[ing] the world as difficult to read,” being “caught in-between,” or living in “a condition of suspension,” to use Titlestad’s terms). It is evident that in Galgut’s and Vladislavic’s work, most recently *In a Strange Room* and *Double Negative*, this results in fragmentary narratives that are informed by what I have called a short fiction sensibility. Two authors do not a pattern make, however; although Vladislavic and Galgut are arguably the leading South African authors of the generation that has followed Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink, et al, they are not necessarily “representative” of South African literature.

The longest South African work of fiction produced in recent years, at over 550 pages, is Michael Cawood Green’s *For the Sake of Silence* (2008). Its narrator, Father Joseph Biegner, an obscure historical figure from the “silent” Trappist order, frequently invites the reader to reflect on the desirability of silence and the limitations of language. Given the length of the book, his paradoxical opening statement (“I have learned at last to measure grace by silence” [9]) accrues an ironic significance with each sustained meditation on this theme. Indeed, one of the novel’s metanarrative interests is circuitous narration, a stylistic consequence of attempting to say the “unsayable.”

Green’s book is historiographical: both a fictionalized history and a commentary on history-writing. Based on comprehensive research conducted over the course of a decade—the kind that can usually only be undertaken by a university-based academic like Green, supported by institutional funding—*For the Sake of Silence* is an account of the life and work of controversial Abbott Franz Pfanner, who led the Trappist enterprise in South Africa in the late nineteenth century and established the monastery at Mariannahill in KwaZulu-Natal. Of the relationship between fact and fiction in the text, the Green writes:

fictional devices proved largely unnecessary as the facts that may be ascertained of the story of Mariannahill and its missions simply took on a life of their own.

But beyond such facts stands the one figure [Father Joseph] who, even in the material details of his history, compels this to be, above all, a work of fiction. For all its fidelity to the research that informs it, it is ultimately the imagined perspective of the narrator of this work that envelops the story and draws the historical record into whatever credibility you are willing to grant the imagination. (549)

For the purposes of this article, Green’s book is significant because the author’s decision to straddle the categories of fiction and nonfiction has a direct connection to the book’s length—or,

more accurately, to reader responses to the book's length. Reviews of the book (noting both its length and its fact/fiction overlap) tended to describe it as if it were a reference work or even a kind of encyclopedia; one reviewer bemoaned the lack of photographs accompanying the text (Hunter 4).

It is also worth mentioning the second-longest work of fiction recently published in South Africa, Denis Beckett's 530-page *Magenta* (2008). Beckett is a well-known journalist, political commentator, and media figure, but *Magenta* is his first novel. As a number of reviewers noted, the fiction is only partly successful as a vehicle for the author's political manifesto: "There's no way to miss the didacticism ... evidence of Beckett's trying to make his narrative fit the message" (Dell 25). Other "long" South African works of fiction, approximately 400 pages, that have appeared in recent years are also "true stories" barely masked by a thin veil of fiction. Chris Marnewick's *Shepherds & Butchers* (2008) is a novelistic depiction of several capital punishment cases in the final years of apartheid; *Little Ice Cream Boy* (2009), by Jacques Pauw, is based squarely on the journalist's interaction with notorious apartheid "hit squad" members like Ferdi Barnard and Eugene de Kock; *Primary Coloured* (2007), is a *roman à clef* detailing author Brent Meersman's experiences as a campaigner for the Independent Democrats, the former party of veteran South African politician Patricia de Lille. The back-cover blurb of each book is telling: "A gripping courtroom drama steeped in the factual" (in Marnewick); "inspired by a true story and events that really happened" (in Pauw); "Remarkably authentic. It's as if [the author] was actually there" (in Meersman). The evidence of some kind of nonfictional "authenticity" is, I would argue, what gives publishers confidence to sell these lengthy "fictions" to what might otherwise be an unreceptive market.

If South African readers seem reluctant to engage with lengthy works of fiction, this is certainly not the case with nonfiction. Publishers have produced weighty volumes that offer readers explicitly factual accounts, confident in the knowledge that their subject-matter—the complexities of South African politics, the grim realities of life in a violent and corrupt society—will attract readers and hold their interest for protracted periods. Perhaps the best-known example is Mark Gevisser's (935-page) *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (2007). Other "magna opera" from the same publisher, Jonathan Ball, were to follow: David Welsh's (650-page) *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (2009) and Antony Altbeker's (440-page) *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree: A True Story of Murder and the Miscarriage of Justice* (2010). Reviewers have hailed these books as magisterial, using the adjectives common to descriptions of authoritative nonfiction: Gevisser's book is "comprehensive" (Perry 60), Welsh's is "definitive" (Uys), and Altbeker's is a "monumental tome" (De Kock 30). It is tempting to see this only as a corollary to the widely-acknowledged assertion that South Africans, like readers in most countries around the world in our era of "reality hunger" (Shields), have a greater appetite for nonfiction than for fiction. In this case, one can do little more than return to an old saw:

the chicken-and-egg question of whether publishers simply respond to, or actually create, public tastes. But there is something else to consider. If long “literary” fiction is generally perceived as too risky, as not commercially viable—and if this indeed reflects on reader resistance—why does the same not apply to “genre” fiction? I will address this question in the concluding section below. That discussion may be usefully introduced, however, by a few observations on race and writing in South Africa.

There is a further level of irony in the “prolixity” of Father Joseph, who narrates *For the Sake of Silence*. Green has affirmed that, for him, the story of Pfanner and Mariannahill “caught the tension between the ethics of speaking and the various forms of silence and silencing rife in both the old and the new South Africa. It led me to rethink my own position in the country” (“Political Fight”), he subsequently left South Africa to take up a university appointment in England. It is, of course, impossible to consider “silence and silencing” in South Africa without taking race into account. A history of oppression of black South Africans, in which almost all white South Africans were either directly complicit or indirectly implicated, problematizes “the ethics of speaking” in post-apartheid South Africa. Who is empowered to speak, whose speech was previously privileged, whose speech was previously denied? Green has made this point more explicitly when discussing his book informally, in a reading of *For the Sake of Silence*: “In the late 1990s it seemed to me that, as a white South African after apartheid, the best thing to do was to keep quiet.”

The fiction-writers whose work I have so far discussed are all white. Is it the case that these authors feel their race (in combination, perhaps, with their age) relegates them to the mezzanine—disqualifies them from making grand gestures in their fiction, from offering bold political commentary, or from painting, as it were, on a large canvas? This is the conclusion that may be extrapolated from J.M. Coetzee’s attitude or, at least, the attitude Coetzee attributes to himself in *Summertime* (2009)—another fragmentary and fictionalized (auto)biographical portrait that, like Coetzee’s earlier “scenes from provincial life,” *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), manipulates the disjunction between author and narrator/s (between “he” and “I” and “you”) in a similar fashion to Galgut. Coetzee, according to a former colleague, felt/feels that the continued presence of white people in South Africa was/is “illegitimate,” “fraudulent,” and “grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid” (Coetzee 209). If the subaltern (to borrow from Gayatri Spivak) cannot speak, then perhaps the white writer, inextricably tied to the historical oppression of the black subaltern, is reluctant to speak too loudly. There may be some merit in this, but recent work by various young black authors weakens such a generalization.

I have written about Nthikeng Mohlele’s *The Scent of Bliss* (2008) elsewhere,⁶ but this partly

allegorical novella merits mention here as one of several “fragmentary” works by a new generation of black writers. Kgebetli Moele’s *The Book of the Dead* (2009) is a short but provocative work divided into two parts. The first, “The Book of the Living,” contains 14 numbered sections (they are hardly chapters) and in a rather unremarkable fashion introduces the reader to Khutso, a character who has our sympathy because of the impoverished conditions under which he grows up. When he contracts HIV, however, Khutso becomes a sociopath on a vindictive mission to spread the virus; this is recorded in “The Book of the Dead” in the second half of the novel(1a). HIV is personified, a device that is used to disturbing effect as the voice of the virus becomes, simultaneously, that of a schizophrenic Khutso and even the author himself. “The Book of the Dead” degenerates structurally (sections are headed by names or numbers and appear to be chronologically ordered, but a sense of entropy pervades the text), and this confusion is aggravated by the slippage between first and third person, achieving a similar effect to *In a Strange Room*. Futhi Ntshingila’s *Shameless* (2008), although not an accomplished novella, presents the story of a young prostitute named Thandiwe through changing narrative points-of-view and a fragmented chronology. One might also point to the ways in which Thando Mqgqolozana’s fictionalized account of a botched circumcision and its consequences, *A Man Who is not a Man* (2009), is informed by a “short fiction sensibility.” Each of these texts (like *Beauty’s Gift* [2008], a novella by the more seasoned writer Sindiwe Magona, which also tackles the HIV/AIDS pandemic) takes an earnest tone in addressing social issues but undoubtedly has characteristics in common with the “mezzanine” texts I have discussed.

Thus, insofar as a “modest authorial purview” finds expression in (or is encouraged by) works of fiction that are influenced by the short story or novella form, or are otherwise “fragmentary,” this is not specific to South African writers of a particular race or age. Indeed, the great majority of “literary” novels published in South Africa over the last four years are relatively slim works of not much more (and often less) than 200 pages. I have already implied that, if this has partly to do with the authors’ “modesty” (in the sense that Titlestad intends), it is also a function of publisher anxiety about reader impatience: choices regarding typeface, page design, and even paper selection tend to facilitate the production of slender volumes that do not to impose themselves with any intimidating gravitas on the consumer or threaten to take up too much time. This is not the case, however, with “popular” fiction or “genre” novels. Here, publishers seem to want to offer value-for-money: the books must be thicker, matching the more easily-marketed format of the “airport read” or the “beach read.” Size, just like cover design, brands these texts in a recognizable (and uniform) way. Paradoxically, then, readers are also promised that the novel being sold to them will not be too demanding; this, really, is the implication of claims that a certain book

can be read “in one sitting,” is a “page-turner,” is “fast-paced” or is, as that unfortunate neologism has it, “unputdownable.”

One might consider the ways in which such designations are applied to a popular fiction genre such as “chick lit”; the “unputdownable” Trinity Luhabe series by South Africa’s own Marian Keyes, Fiona Snyckers, is a good example. At this juncture, however, it will be more illuminating to turn to two texts included in the broad (and, it seems, ever-expanding) category of South African “crime writing.” Altbeker’s *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree*, for instance, has cover endorsements by Deon Meyer and Marlene van Niekerk. Meyer, the country’s best-selling writer of crime fiction in both English and Afrikaans, calls it “totally mesmerizing and riveting” (qtd. in Altbeker) in a quotation that is clearly intended to place the book in the readily-promotable and, indeed, self-promoting terrain of the “krimi.” Van Niekerk’s shout is also telling: “It reads like a thriller and is utterly unput-down-able ... It almost convinces one that fiction has become redundant in this country” (qtd. in Altbeker). This is, of course, disingenuous from the author of such acclaimed fictions as *Triomf* and *Agaat*. Yet Van Niekerk’s words manage simultaneously to acknowledge the book’s substance (both because of her own “literary” status and because she calls *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree* “obligatory reading for those interested in the current state of the nation”) and to pitch it as an “easy” read. Another example is Mike Nicol’s cover commendation of *Refuge* (2009) by Andrew Brown: “A gripping tour de force ... powerful, fast, beautifully written” (qtd. in Brown). *Refuge* portrays, with some nuance, the complex problems of immigration and xenophobia in South Africa; it also treats of the murky world of organized crime. Brown has voiced his frustration with “the tag of crime fiction writer,” noting that it annoys him “not because there is anything inferior about crime writing, but because the categorization is lazy”: “*Refuge* is not meant to be a crime thriller at all and I really don’t feel that it falls into the genre of crime writing. It would be just as inappropriate for example to label it as ‘erotica’ merely because it contains some explicit scenes” (qtd. in Nicol). If this is the case, Brown has his publishers (Zebra Press) to blame; it was an inevitable result of a cover endorsement from Nicol, who is a prominent and unabashed activist on behalf of the “krimi” genre, emphasizing the “speed” of the narrative – and, implicitly, the speed at which it may be read – even as it praises the book’s “beautiful” prose.

Like Brown, by making these observations I may be “seeming to denigrate the genre of crime writing, which is certainly not my intention” (qtd. in Nicol). While there are significant moral and aesthetic concerns when it comes to representing the violent crime that characterizes South African society, it is clear that many South African crime writers have given due consideration to the ethics of their vocation. Margie Orford, for instance, has explained her choice of the genre as follows:

I wanted to write about South Africa as it is. Urban, fractious, shifting, uncontained ... I felt besieged by the extravagant violence of the place. I took the fact that we have the highest rape and murder rates in the world very personally ... I needed to find a way to live here, fully engaged, and the barricaded suburbs patrolled by armed response vans did not do it for me ... So, in order to understand the paradox of the Rainbow Nation—its brutality and its kindness—I turned my lens to crime ... Crime fiction has surprised me in its flexibility and in how it works for South Africa ... In all countries, but in South Africa particularly because of our segregated past, cops and journalists are the only people who can plausibly navigate through this fractured and stratified society.

Nicol, likewise, recalls that “One of the things that attracted me to crime fiction is the moral ambiguity it creates. There are no angels” (qtd. in Van Eeden Harrison). While crime novels typically conclude with the triumph of “moral justice,” if not of the justice system, appealing to a reader’s “innate desire to have good stomp all over evil,” many “krimis” resist the facile endings and stock characters associated with the genre. Indeed, one might even recognize in Nicol’s reference to Raymond Chandler (“crime fiction is a parody of itself, as tongue-in-cheek as it gets”) a hint of the “modest” or the “mezzanine”: “Crime fiction confronts serious social issues but simultaneously says, *don’t take me seriously*.” Nonetheless, commercial pressures—the need to sell as many copies as possible to a market that is perceived as hungry for easily-digestible “crime lit”—dictate that such complexity is not easily accommodated. Nicol describes his novels as “pulp fiction” with “hardboiled prose,” and is unashamed about the formulaic requirements of much popular writing; in particular, he is critical of “academics who haven’t yet got their heads around the idea that commercial fiction has a completely legitimate place in any society’s literary life.”

Here Nicol is indirectly responding, I have previously suggested,⁷ to an assessment of his recent books (the Revenge trilogy of crime novels—*Payback* (2008), *Killer Country* (2010), and *Black Heart* (2011)) by Leon de Kock. The review in fact praises Nicol’s writing, but De Kock poses an important question: has Nicol found a genre/form/mode that “allows the most astute social analysis possible in current conditions, or is he a formerly serious, literary writer who has deliberately dumbed down to play to the gallery?” (“Hits Keep Coming” 29) What does it mean to reject the “modest authorial purview” of the mezzanine, to make it explicit that one is writing “schlock,” to jettison the very notion of the literary? As with the *Mail & Guardian* debate, defensive responses⁸ to De Kock’s review from authors accusing academics of ivory tower elitism in fact reinscribed distinctions between the “literary” and the “popular,” the “serious” and the “lite,” the “high” and the “low.”

It ought not to be the task of literary scholars to categorize books according to these divisions; as I noted above, anyone familiar with post-Leavis debates about canonicity must view such categories as dubious. Yet, while the “serious” recognition (albeit in the always-problematic form of literary awards) given to “popular” writers such as Lauren Beukes and Sifiso Mzobe⁹ indicates that these binaries need not constrain either an author’s vision or a publisher’s marketing/business model, the examples I have discussed of recent South African fiction suggest that “the long and the short” is, however crass, a fair measure of the continued potency of such binaries. As long as “literary” fiction is marginalized—marked for, and marketed to, only “literary” readers—its writers will continue to occupy the “mezzanine” and adopt a “modest authorial purview.” Then again, in light of Titlestad’s account of the “mezzanine ontology” in contemporary South Africa, perhaps that is as it should be.

NOTES

1. See Frenkel and MacKenzie 1-10.

2. Books are subject to steep import duties and a 14% Value-Added Tax (VAT) charge. Despite numerous campaigns to scrap these costs, which make books prohibitively expensive to many South Africans, the government has not made any legislative changes.

3. Articles in this series are collected electronically, with commentary, at <<http://bookslive.co.za/blog/tag/mg-sa-lit-crit/>>. The comments streams referred to may also be found here. See list of works cited for individual references.

4. The comic exploits of “Spud” Milton and his boarding school friends have grown into a veritable franchise, including a series of three novels (the first of which sold over 200,000 copies, a figure unmatched in contemporary South African fiction), a high-grossing film, and a book about the making of the film.

5. See Gaylard.

6. See Thurman, “Places Everywhere” 97-98.

7. See Thurman, “Criminals and Krimis.”

8. See the comment stream at <<http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2010/02/15/leon-de-kock-gives-mike-nicols-killer-country-a-carrot-but-wonders-what-crime-writing-portends-for-sa-lit/>>.

9. Beukes’s dystopian urban fantasy *Zoo Story* (2010) won the Arthur C. Clarke Award; Mzobe’s debut, the coming-of-age crime novel *Young Blood* (2010), was a surprise winner of the Sunday Times Fiction Prize.

WORKS CITED

- Accone, Darryl. "Publish and Be Damned." *Mail & Guardian*. Web. 7 Feb. 2011.
- Awerbuck, Diane. "Interview with Henrietta Rose-Innes." *Sunday Times* 29 Aug. 2010, Lifestyle sec.: 14. Print.
- Altbeker, Antony. *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree: A True Story of Murder and the Miscarriage of Justice*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2010. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Legislators and Interpreters*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1987. Print.
- Brown, Andrew. *Refuge*. Johannesburg: Zebra, 2009. Print.
- Chapman, Michael. "A Case of Story: Coetzee, Gordimer, Bosman...!" *Current Writing* 16.1 (2004): 1-15. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life*. London: Harvill Secker, 2009. Print.
- De Kock, Leon. "A Conceptual Murder Thriller." *The Sunday Independent* 6 June 2010: 30. Print.
- . "Hits Keep Coming but it Ain't Enough." *The Sunday Independent* 14 Feb. 2010: 29. Print.
- Dell, Sharon. "Proudly Idiosyncratic." *The Witness* 11 Feb. 2009: 25. Print.
- Frenkel, Ronit, and Craig MacKenzie. "Conceptualizing 'Post-Transitional' South African Literature in English." *English Studies in Africa* 53.1 (2010): 1-11. *Taylor and Francis Online*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- Galgut, Damon. *In a Strange Room*. Johannesburg: Penguin, 2010. Print.
- Gaylard, Gerald, ed. *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavic*. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2011. Print.
- Green, Michael Cawood. "For the Sake of Silence." English Academy Conference. Pretoria. 24 June 2008. Reading.
- . *For the Sake of Silence*. Johannesburg: Umuzi, 2008. Print.
- . "Political Fight was Backdrop for My Story." *The Journal*. Web. 7 May 2010.
- Gross, John. *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: Aspects of English Literary Life Since 1800*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- Harris, Sam. "The Future of the Book." *Sam Harris Blog*. Web. 26 Sept. 2011.
- Hunter, Eva. "Abbot's Moving Confession Builds Understanding of Monks' Conflict." *Cape Times* 30 May 2008, Lifestyle sec.: 4. Print.
- Klipp, Veronica. "Scholarly Writing a Lonely Road." *Mail & Guardian*. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- Marnewick, Chris. *Shepherds & Butchers*. Johannesburg: Umuzi, 2008. Print.
- Medalie, David. *The Mistress's Dog: Short Stories 1996-2010*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2010. Print.
- Ndebele, Njabulo. *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991. Print.
- Morris, Jan. Rev. of *In a Strange Room*, by Damon Galgut. *The Guardian* 22 May 2010. Web. 22 May 2010.
- Nicol, Mike. "The Dreaded Genre Label" (Interview with Andrew Brown)." *Books LIVE*. Web. 22 Feb. 2010.
- Orford, Margie. "Killing for Others." *International Crime Authors*. Web. 20 Dec. 2010.
- Perry, Alex. "Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred" *Time* 5 Dec. 2007: 60. Print.
- Salafranca, Arja. "The Renaissance of Short-Story Publishing." *The Star* 9 Oct. 2008: 19. Print.
- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Snyckers, Fiona. *Trinity on Air*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2010. Print.

- Thurman, Chris. "Interview with Ivan Vladislavic." 18 July 2008. Unpublished.
- Thurman, Chris. "Places Elsewhere, Then and Now: Allegory 'Before' and 'After' South Africa's Transition?" *English Studies in Africa* 53.1 (2010): 91-103. *Taylor and Francis Online*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- Thurman, Chris. "Criminals and Krimis: Writing Crime in SA." *Media Club South Africa*. Web. 23 Dec. 2010.
- Titlestad, Michael. Afterword. "Observations on Post-Apartheid Literature." *The Mistress's Dog: Short Stories 1996-2010*. By David Medalie. Johannesburg: Pan-Macmillan-Picador Africa, 2010. 181-91. Print.
- Thornton, Robert. "South Africa: Countries, Boundaries, Enemies and Friends." *Anthropology Today* 10.6 (1994): 7-15. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- Uys, Stanley. "Apartheid Revisited." *PoliticsWeb*. Web. 21 Apr. 2010.
- Van Eeden Harrison, Janet. "A Game: Mike Nicol in Conversation." *LitNet*. Web. 24 Oct. 2011.
- Vladislavic, Ivan. *Double Negative*. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2010. Print.
- Welsh, David. *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2009. Print.
- Zvomuya, Percy. "You Are What you Read." *Mail & Guardian*. Web. 11 Feb. 2011.