

“the public” is through our teaching. And as literary and cultural studies people in particular, this work involves the rare delight of introducing young people to imaginative texts as a complex mode of knowledge. If we are to use our privileged position as a vehicle for eco-social advocacy, this teaching environment may well be our best opportunity. So I am always keen to discover new material, and this collection offers quite a lot.

The fence, the wall, the great divide. What the eco-texts explored in *Natures of Africa* demonstrate is that our best work may be to render the binary divide irrelevant: to show, unambiguously, that it really is not there. At a time when too many people want to build walls, this is something vital that writers and critics can do. So yes, we do need this book.

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Losing the Plot. Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing.

Leon de Kock.

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In this wide-ranging and impressive account of postapartheid writing, De Kock describes the “dizzingly heterogeneous corpus” (1) of South African literature after apartheid with the aim of describing its distinctive features and complexity.

The methodology is straightforward. De Kock has chosen to read particular literary works in order to identify broader ideas and trends. To contextualise the study, De Kock deploys the key, pervasive notion of “transition”. The notion is variously defined as a “transformative shift from one ‘state’ to another” (2), a “popular mythology” in the “collective consciousness” (3), and as containing a counter-discourse of disillusionment or disorientation, which De Kock refers to as “‘plot loss’” (3). This “plot loss” becomes a central trope in the book to express the social and political chaos of the country, evident in various criminal manifestations of neo-colonialism such as neo-liberal economic policies, new forms of racism, and corruption. The term also refers to actual “plot loss” by authors who, struggling to express in effective and appropriate ways the disillusionment which is now intrinsic to the notion of transition, attempt nevertheless to meaningfully engage with the multiplicity of crimes which beset the nation. Postapartheid writing, De Kock argues, is, on the one hand, intensely involved in identifying wrongdoing and villains, whilst on the other hand it strives to utilise narrative to heal and inscribe new identities. In so doing, De Kock commends authors who are trying to regain the plot (a sort of national moral compass through a process of social detection) and who are concomitantly inscribing new literary plots. The many writers selected for analysis in this book are lauded for their courage and imaginative zeal in conducting social analysis in

a bewildering context. In formal literary terms, De Kock uncovers two trends to do with plot. Some authors underplay plot for reasons of verisimilitude—their reduced plotting reflects the social reality of disorder. Other authors overplay plot through a process of literary forensics as they embark on a crime-solving mission that focuses on exposing the sources of public and private wrongdoing.

De Kock singles out crime fiction and literary nonfiction as pre-eminent examples of postapartheid literature that problematise and ironise the notion of transition. This, as is cogently shown in the book, is the literature that asks the painful, often unanswerable, questions about how the country comes to be in this state of plot loss, and how we can plot our way out of such a malaise. One of the great achievements of postapartheid literature of this ilk, De Kock contends, is its debunking of transition: “Transition, the putative mid-point of postapartheid culture, is frequently shown to be a paradoxical cross-temporal knot, an ateleological threshold replete with ambiguity” (14). Through careful unpacking of the notion of transition, as it manifests in the literature, De Kock conducts his own intrepid scholarly detection, ultimately unveiling the dangers and positive imaginative responses to both senses of plot loss.

For De Kock this book is a crusade—a campaign to chart through the postapartheid literary terrain a path towards virtue. He finds his first point of orientation in “the restorative value of story itself” (De Kock 15). So, while plot loss reigns

supreme in the socio-political sphere, in literature narrative has been catapulted to new heights of ontological and hermeneutic value. Moreover, these narratives, articulated by many voices which utilise varying forms, are shown to have ethical value, as they are the markers towards virtue.

De Kock marches forward, showing how a “culture of authentic self-expression” (17) has flourished in this context of indeterminacy and ambiguity. With reference to works by authors as disparate as Deon Meyer and Jonny Steinberg, De Kock convincingly illustrates the heterogeneity and diagnostic value of postapartheid writing. Crime fiction and literary nonfiction, both of which are stories which bear a strong relation to the “real” and which express lived experience, are the main co-ordinates of this book. Through close readings of a diverse range of crime fiction, literary nonfiction, and fiction (albeit fiction which has been modified by the twin imperatives of “truth” and the “real”) texts, this book demonstrates that the flipside to plot loss, then, is a positive development in postapartheid South Africa. This development is celebrated by De Kock as stories which validate individual and group identities. Self-consciously hovering on the edge of a certain romanticisation of the potency of narrative, the book also questions these antidotes to plot loss, and subjects them to critical scrutiny. This self-reflexive catechism, which adds a rich layer to the book, is achieved mainly through the diverse range of texts selected for

analysis. Spanning, chronologically, a twenty-year period, and formally, crime thrillers such as Deon Meyer's *Heart of the Hunter*, hybrid creative nonfiction such as Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, and the photojournalistic dispatches of Greg Marinovich that cover the massacre at Marikana and the Farlam Commission. This array of primary material, coupled with the books abiding concern with the tensions between "reality" or "truth" and fiction, resists reductive argumentation and counters the book's tendency to sometimes scabble towards a much desired but elusive, and perhaps, impossible in "real" terms, notion of virtue.

For scholars of South African literature, this is a compulsory read which charts a course from crime fiction and its treatment of cultural difference in Chapter One, through postapartheid "white" writing which persistently engages with spectres of the past in Chapter Two, then on to a postapartheid literature of disillusionment which describes how writers yearn for a deliverance from plot loss whilst simultaneously acknowledging that this hope is futile in Chapter Three, followed by a closer look at how fictional and nonfictional representations of crime perform social detection in Chapter Four, succeeded by an exploration of how new media render visible the "crime scene" or "wound culture" in Chapter Five, and which arrives finally at an assessment of fictional responses to the crimes of post-apartheid South Africa. De Kock ends this journey with a brief remark, which has been made emphatically and cogently enough throughout the book, that writers

have to tell the right story, to tell the story right, that is, they need to plot carefully the path to virtue.

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Learning Zulu: A secret history of language in South Africa.

Mark Sanders.

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Taking a leaf from the book under review, I'll start by injecting an autobiographical element. Much of what Sanders examines here echoes my own experience, after Zimbabwe's independence, of heading to a remote mission school to teach for two years. Part of my purpose was to learn better Shona, the majority language from which I had been systematically discouraged by my colonial education. It was, in a way, a gesture of reparation, or addressing a nagging "white guilt", or at least of assuaging a sense of fruitless loss and exclusion. I was nowhere near as successful in attaining fluency as Sanders seems have been in learning Zulu; and now that I live in the Eastern Cape, my efforts to learn Xhosa have been similarly patchy and faltering. One thing is evident throughout Sanders's dense discussions: long-term, assiduous application and periods of total immersion are vital—and as he points out, few whites in South Africa