



# A twisted MODEL

The conditions in South Africa force Sean Badal to eschew the crime genre formula, writes Mary Corrigan



**T**HE *Ice on Mars* (Wigan Pier Press) may be centred on crime and it opens with a murder but it cannot be aligned with genre literature. Crime as a social phenomenon is what is under study here, rather than plotting a suspenseful path towards the discovery of the killer's identity and motives, as is the case with conventional crime literature.

However, and ironically, the fact that picking apart the murder is not the focus, works at emphasising the mechanics of crime in South African society.

In other words, because this crime goes unsolved and the act of solving it is not driving the narrative, serves to underpin the warped extent of this societal malady.

That there is no motive for the murder in this story – it's an accidental death – and that the killer's identity is almost irrelevant, highlights the ubiquity of crime, the senselessness and the inability of the security services to prevent and resolve instances of it.

Sean Badal's novel, therefore, covertly implies that the real-life conditions of crime in this country make it impossible for authors to appropriate the crime novel formula – it's too out of sync with reality to be convincing. The level of disorder in this society is so persistent that normal responses to death cannot be realised.

In some ways this brings to

mind a device used by Nadine Gordimer in *The Conservationist*, where the body of the unknown black man found on the farm of the main character is relegated to a sub-plot. The initial insignificance of his murder directs attention to the inhumanity of apartheid society.

In *The Ice on Mars*, the seeming irrelevance of the death of a young white girl points to a different kind of moral degeneration – that of a corrupt post-apartheid state.

She is the daughter of Samuel Steyn, an affluent surgeon, who lives in fear of crime; he chooses to drive a white Lexus instead of a typical luxury vehicle like a BMW or Mercedes because he believes its "bland anonymity" will dissuade hijackers.

When one of his car windows is shattered at a Sandton intersection notorious for hijackings and theft, he believes he is being robbed. Instead he finds his daughter dead in the back seat; she has been hit by a stray bullet during a police shoot-out with criminals after a cash-in-transit heist.

Despite his anxiety and paranoia about being a victim of crime, he isn't prepared for the death of his daughter. This tragedy causes a deep rupture within him that will never heal.

The "guttural roar" he emits as he clings to his daughter's lifeless body hails from "the very depths of the land itself", writes Badal, implying that this rift has not only shattered Steyn's psyche but has

displaced the national consciousness, shifting it towards a place where reconciliation would be impossible.

Steyn becomes an observer of life. He returns to places of familiarity and comfort; his father's home, the hospital where he works and his swanky pad at the Michelangelo Towers, but he cannot shake a pervasive sense of restlessness.

Even when he is in the arms of his lover during a seaside getaway, he appears disconnected, numb. In the midst of conversations he can sometimes only hear the beating of his heart. At other times, he is separated from himself – as Badal observes: "Perhaps that was the secret, to be outside oneself."

Badal doesn't seem to be overly consumed with exposing the foibles of the attitudes of white people in relation to crime but that he has chosen to address this phenomenon from the perspective of someone of that race can't be overlooked. Certainly, the degree of paranoia about crime that Steyn suffers from feels typically "white".

When Steyn spends the night at his father's place he notices the dusty wooden knobkerrie in his home.

The presence of this dated weapon, so characteristic of the kind of object people of an older generation would keep, evinces the culture of fear that has been instilled in Steyn as a child. It's a very subtle insinuation, which may have not been intentional.

Badal doesn't challenge or show cracks in Steyn's world view. He is obviously pegged as a liberal, though today the notion of a white liberal is so often viewed as an oxymoron.

Nevertheless, during an encounter with an Afrikaner working at a private forensics laboratory, Steyn is differentiated from those who embrace Eurocentric world-views.

That Steyn loses his daughter because of crime suggests his fear is grounded in reality. In this way the paranoia of an older generation has been realised.

Confirming a persistent sense of disorder and lawlessness, Steyn is forced to manipulate the police to get some answers about his daughter's death.

In this way Steyn becomes complicit in the corruption that he so abhors.

Badal proposes that this compromise isn't a reflection of Steyn's character but rather is a natural response to the twisted society he is part of. It is unknown whether the bullet that killed Steyn's daughter came from the gun of a criminal or a police officer.

This serves as a powerful metaphor for the blurred lines between these traditionally binary figures.

Badal paints a bleak picture of South Africa; he offers no reprieve, nor hope.

When Steyn becomes embroiled in the corrupt system that he disapproves of, it seems that the persistent crooked sense of morality that has gripped this society converts its detractors. It cannot be challenged or overturned.

It is not acts of violence that concern Badal – they are simply the symptoms of a warped society – it is the impact of them that he is interested in mapping.

Because of this, his focus is on the survivors. Unfortunately, this means his novel doesn't extend the dialogue on the topic of crime – the media and other cultural products are invariably centred on the victim's narratives.

Though Badal assumes the third-person narrative voice, which offers him the scope to probe beyond Steyn, he roots his story in a single position: the white middle-class victim. Unfortunately, readers are familiar with that perspective.

## Crime debate: whodunit or whydunit?

A DEBATE on the crime genre was sparked on Slipnet, the Stellenbosch Literary Project website, by Lynda Gilfillan when in her review of Margie Orford's latest offering, *Gallows Hill*, she suggested that not all local crime fiction was "schlock". This observation unleashed a high art versus low art debate.

"It's a tired rebuttal," she wrote, "but one that apparently needs to be reiterated: when Shakespeare wrote his plays in 17th century England, and Dickens his serialised novels in the Victorian era, what were the topics and who were the audiences? Villainy and murder most foul, of course, and the consumer was the common man, the oke in the pub. Like us, the Elizabethans and Victorians lived in times of social upheaval, in a world that was fast becoming globalised; their societies had much in common with post-apartheid South Africa."

She further argued that in "crime-ridden South Africa, where perpetrators go unpunished (the conviction rate for murder is 10 percent), crime fiction offers the opportunity of justice being seen to be done... In South Africa, the best crime fiction is a 'whydunit' rather than a 'whodunit', I'd say."

In response, Kavish Chetty suggested that "crime fiction employs history and politics as largely incidental to its narrative. It can run those things through its assembly line, and ultimately use them as mere conduits to a fantasy catharsis. I have yet to read local crime fiction that was complex about its territory. I have yet to watch local crime-genre cinema (recently, *How to Steal 2 Million*; *31 Million Reasons*) that wasn't just a tourist circuit through a bunch of American clichés.

"The catharsis thing might be enjoyable – thrilling, whatever – but there's nothing particularly admirable or sophisticated about it. Thing is this: these reactionary defences of crime fiction are not proving their point very well."

Professor, author and founder of Slipnet Leon de Kock joined the debate: "My sense is that we need to do a lot more unscrambling of the 'krimi' category, which has perhaps now outlived its purpose. Cut to Gilfillan's suggestion (citing the perception of 'many critics') that crime fiction may have become what Gilfillan delicately brackets as 'the new political novel'... what Gilfillan is suggesting is similar to an argument I made in the Mail & Guardian in 2011 about (Mike) Nicol's silkily smooth thriller, *Black Heart*: that the dividing line between 'crime fiction' and 'serious' so-called SA Lit is becoming increasingly blurry. So-called crime fiction, using 'genre' elements, has perhaps become the only readable form of 'political' fiction.

"Yes, it is 'genre' – as Chetty points out – but it's also more. It's the "more" that we should perhaps be interested in, and how that margin of "more" is performing some of what one might call the "uses" of literature in reading bewilderingly changed political out-there... To read more of the debate, visit [www.slipnet.co.za](http://www.slipnet.co.za)

## Meet the author...

SEAN Badal is a journalist and writer. He spends a "disproportionate part of his life in Johannesburg". From his apartment in the CBD, he keeps a hawkish eye on the malfeasances of the city officials "who potter around uselessly".

He has authored a number of books which include *Dead Sanctities* (1999), *Seeds of Disorder* (2002) and *The Fall of the Black-eyed Night* (2008).

The latter drew a mixed response from Chris Dunton, who proposed in his review in *The Sunday Independent* that there were "too many non-sequiturs and redundant asides, too many clunky phrases."

Dunton did however, conclude that Badal's novel possessed a "good deal of energy and insight," which held his attention from the outset.

That novel was long-listed for

the 2009 *The Sunday Times* Fiction award as was *The Ice on Mars* for the 2011 Fiction Award.

Badal writes on travel, science, technology and business for a "wildly disparate range of publications, from *Wired*, *Financial Times* to, er, *Playboy*." Other than writing, he lists his main interests as history, science, astronomy, computing, and Islamic art and architecture, particularly of the Abbasid dynasty.

What was the main challenge in the writing of *The Ice on Mars*?

On one level, the book was about loss and grief, and the (some-

RAGE: Sean Badal, angry at corruption.

times futile) coping mechanisms that we humans deploy to keep ourselves sane.

The hardest part therefore, was keeping a sense of emotional detachment from the main protagonist. Reading Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* helped!

Are you satisfied with the end product: do you have any reservations about it, would you do anything differently?

I think for most writers there's always the nagging sense that things could have been better, or at least different. I tend

to write "backwards" in that I try to have the ending in sight at all times. That helps to finish the book.

The one reservation I usually have when I've finished a book is whether I've revealed too much about my own self.

What drove you to write the novel?

A sense of rage at the corrosive effects of corruption that we see around us, how it eats away at everything, in the process diminishing all our values. It made me feel less impotent in the face of what is happening in SA – if only temporarily.

What are you working on now?

I've given up on social realism so I'm currently writing a book that weaves through the Beatles, Hamburg in the '60s, finishing off in Afghanistan in 2001 (I hope).

