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## Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing

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# **Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing**

**by Leon de Kock**

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In the epilogue to *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, Mark Sanders writes perceptively of the tensions that underpin scholarly engagement with contexts that are not yet reified by the remove of time. He suggests that the scholar's commitment to academic rigour awkwardly intersects with the intellectual's responsibility to address urgent contemporary situations whose dimensions are still in flux. But if it is difficult mediating between these duties and identities, 'it is more difficult to explain how one is implicated as a human being who entered life at a particular time and in a particular place, in the scholarly work that one does' (Sanders 2007, 188).

Leon de Kock's *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing* doesn't have an epilogue, nor does it offer comparable moments of guard-dropping and self-interrogation. It is nonetheless a work of scholarship acutely aware of being embedded in a specific social context. And as such, it opens with suggestive propositional nuance: this is 'not a study of . . . but a study in' (de Kock 2016, 1) postapartheid South African writing. More than just a nod to the limits of objectivity, the declaration brackets the book as part of the socio-literary context that it grapples with. That context extends beyond 'SA lit' to include diverse forms of writing – genre fiction, literary journalism, realist fiction – which bear witness to a sense of 'plot loss' and disorientation in the 'post-postapartheid', post-'rainbowist' present. Without explicitly tracing plot loss in meta-critical terms, de Kock is alive to the fact that South African 'writers and intellectuals of all stripes' (p. 3; my emphasis) operate from within a position of political dislocation. Consequently and with subtle self-awareness, *Losing the Plot* is folded into its subject.

Emerging as quiet refrain throughout the study, that subject is the dual drive in postapartheid writing 'to find the right story' and 'to get the story right'. These injunctions are useful handles by which to grab de Kock's main arguments, since they



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open onto the aetiology of plot loss and, more importantly, gesture at the imbrication of ethics and aesthetics. Dealing with the underlying conditions first, it seems obvious that any effort of recovery implies prior loss, rupture, and displacement. Such loss inheres in the vanished optimism of transition and the feelings of dysphoria that have come to replace it. In other words, ‘plot loss’ speaks to a range of negative *affective* experiences that are refracted through a phenomenology of crime, corruption, and deferred dreams.

Such affective experiences can be disabling. In an unsparing diagnosis of what he identified in 2015 as ‘this astonishing age of solipsism and narcissism’, Achille Mbembe remarked with bitter disappointment that the self-affirmation of the 1990s has given way to ‘the discourse of fracture, injury and victimization’ (2015). But loss can also spur inquiry into the reasons that underpin it. *Losing the Plot* does not give us a glib version of either response, nor does it suggest their mutual exclusion. On the one hand, there is sober analysis of the country’s ‘cult of commiseration’ (p. 142): the new-media ouroboros of referred pain in which each instance of social fragility stands in synecdochic relation to a national pathology. On the other, there is also careful argumentation around the generative potential of negative affect. In the writing under discussion – disparate works unified by ‘looming disillusionment’ (p. 4) – the very same disillusionment is seen to supply a baseline condition that compels inductive modes of writing. Not as crutch but as ‘prosthesis’ (p. 142), postapartheid writing engages in a project of retrieval and recuperation while bearing witness to a persistent absence.<sup>1</sup>

Returning to the first imperative, it becomes clear that seeking out the right story implies another kind of loss: that of clearly defined ends and enemies. The quest for civic virtue is complicated in different measure by past and present conditions: the fading though never forgotten spectre of apartheid, but also the dictates of global neoliberalism and local cronyism that have announced the death of the country’s exceptionalism. What this means for the postapartheid ‘imaginary’ is the disappearance of a simple antagonism, a straightforward writing *against*. De Kock writes that ‘[u]nlike the situation during apartheid, when . . . writers knew who was right and who wrong, the postapartheid milieu is less easily legible’ (p. 4). Perhaps this is an oversimplification in itself, but the argument is borne out if one compares the very different South African situations to which *Down Second Avenue* and *Ways of Staying* respectively respond. In his autobiographical work of 1959, Es’kia Mphahlele bemoaned the overdeterminations of protest writing that have ‘become a terrible cliché as literary material’ (p. 224). With cutting self-irony, Kevin Bloom (2009, 8) recycles these words fifty years later in a book that deals with the temptation to regard private suffering as public affliction, and vice versa. *Ways of Staying* is in fact one of the touchstone texts for *Losing the Plot*. While sparked by personal tragedy, the book is exemplary of teleologically-divested forensic inquiry into South Africa and its discontents. More importantly, Bloom’s authorial voice – like that of Steinberg, Krog, Wa-Afrika, Gevisser and other nonfiction authors discussed by de Kock – modulates between the self-doubt, suspension of credulity, and

delay of conclusiveness that variously characterize postapartheid writing's searching modes of address.

Here we arrive at 'getting the story right': the overlap between reality and fiction, ethics and art. It is worth noting that de Kock sees socio-political engagement as the 'primary function' (p. 87) of literature (broadly conceived), and that the conditions of loss outlined above facilitate the urgent rediscovery of this function. As a study pointedly concerned with the 'formal patterns [that] emerge from postapartheid writing' (p. 7), *Losing the Plot* pays particular attention to the emergence of creative nonfiction and genre fiction as engaged forms of writing, with realist fiction bringing up the rear. Indeed, the very structuring of the book attests to a transfer of cultural capital *from* the novel *to* creative nonfiction and (in lesser measure) crime fiction: works of nonfiction predominate, crime fiction is discussed in the first proper chapter, while literary fiction receives sustained attention only in the final chapter. (One is tempted also to read the marginal presence of J. M. Coetzee as a sly statement about that author's monolithic presence within the canon of SA literature).

The rising cachet of creative nonfiction and crime fiction is attributed to their capacity to probe the 'sickness of the body politic' (p. 9), which probing in turn feeds into the country's previously mentioned pathology or 'wound culture'. The term is adopted from Mark Seltzer, whose theory about communal fascination with the spectacle of violence or trauma is applied to a South African context where lacerations of the social fabric are recursively looped in ways that necessarily complicate the relationship between 'reality' and 'fiction'. Thus between crime novels and investigative journalism there emerges a strange logic of mutual return. While de Kock doesn't explicitly make the argument in surveying works by Meyer, Orford, Nicol and others, it might be inferred that crime fiction – in its data-dependent, incident-heavy form – loses its escapist value in hitting too close to home. But such loss is exactly what transforms the genre into a viable literary vehicle for engaging questions of moral entanglement and civic virtue. Conversely, investigative journalism relies on fictional manoeuvres that circumvent, for instance, corruption-fatigue and also redirect the reader's gaze from a vast undifferentiated wound to the singularities that are (or perhaps aren't) part of that wound. As Jonny Steinberg trenchantly puts it in *Midlands* (2002, 148): 'social degeneration has names and faces'.

If 'overplotting' marks creative journalism and crime fiction, 'underplotting' typifies a new kind of literary novel that 'yield[s] to the real' (de Kock, p. 8) in placing a higher premium on projection over invention (exemplars include Beukes, Coovadia, Duiker, Mpe, van Niekerk, van Heerden, Vladislavic, and others). Though these concepts appear to imply two opposing impulses, they are really informed by the same responsiveness to the 'crime' and 'reality' which conspicuously precede 'fiction' in the book's subtitle. In fact, de Kock identifies the inductive, empirical modes of creative nonfiction and crime fiction as a directive influence on literary fiction. In the final chapter, the tellingly titled 'Fiction's Response', he remarks that the 'emphasis on discovery rather than invention . . . acts as a weathervane for writers', identifying literature's sensitivity to

the diagnostic and archival turn in post-TRC writing. Overplotting and underplotting stand as something of a false binary, particularly given the astute observation that some of the country's finest writing constitute 'cross-modal' blends (p. 209). Nevertheless, it transpires clearly enough that writing in the 'detection mode' (p. 58) – no matter the form – is compelled by a need to 'find the right story' and to 'get the story right'.

Significantly, the final paragraph of the book reissues these imperatives:

. . . narrative reconstruction of the real cannot but make use of 'fictionality' . . . While such-cross supplementation is common to all literatures, it is distinguishable in South African writing by the special urgency in writers' attempts to tell the right story, or to get the story right. Therein, indeed, lies the deep, exhilarating paradox of the literature as a whole, the continuum from apartheid to post-postapartheid. We will need to plot our way carefully, to make sure we get this story right. (p. 210)

I remarked at the outset that *Losing the Plot* has no epilogue or conclusion. This is regrettable, particularly for the reviewer avid of a clinching word. But at the same time the absence of a conclusion is fitting, since the closing paragraph – rather than serving as the full stop in a critical theodicy – humbly opens the book up as a first step, a new venture, in approaching the expanding body of postapartheid writing. Not only is the dizzying range of texts under discussion an education in itself, but de Kock's formidable scholarship and intellectual daring should spur us on – as writers, academics, intellectuals, South Africans – to seek out the stories that matter and to tell them right.

## Note

1 For another perspective on how 'bad feelings' can 'reinvigorate the political', see Andrew van der Vlies's *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (2017, ix).

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