

‘Dogs of the Government’

The Portrayal of the Police in South African  
Literature between 1979 and 2010

Keryl Howie

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English and Creative Writing  
School of Humanities  
University of Adelaide  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of the police in South African literature written in English (or in some cases translated into English) between 1979 and 2010. It considers how writers have utilised crime fiction, confession, autobiography and realist fiction in order to address the perception that the police who are intended to protect the community have been despised by the majority and, at times, associated with evil. This thesis argues that the problematic subject of South Africa's police is at the heart of the country's transition from apartheid. It tracks representations of the police as exemplary of the changing preoccupations of South African literature.

To tell a story of the police is to engage with the political. This is especially so in a South African political and social context that has radically corrupted the codes of westernised policing. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) exposed the Security Branch police as responsible for gross violations of human rights, damaging the reputation of police officers to a far greater extent than had been the case through their often violent upholding of the apartheid regime. Commencing with works published in 1979, the year in which the government took decisive action through the Security Branch to increase the sinister nature of policing and legislate for increased protection of the police from public scrutiny, this thesis examines works by writers who have used the figure of the police officer to embody the political and to make public, in some instances, stories of the police that were previously untold. Bringing together fiction and non-fiction I contend that the writers' choices of genre have been fundamental in their challenge to state-sanctioned representations of the police and the nation's historicity.

Chapter one discusses the apartheid crime fiction of Wessel Ebersohn as an example of protest literature. Chapters two and four capture two different chronological moments in the transition to confessional literature and address the key interest of this thesis; that is, the impact that changing public information about the Security Branch police has had on the white South African imaginary. A sense of uneasy identification between the writer and his or her police officer subject is evident in the non-fiction considered in these chapters. Receiving police confessions becomes transformational for the writers who come to a sense of their own complicity. In contrast, Gillian Slovo, whose mother was murdered by Security Branch police, affirms images of the police as evil in her fictional rendering of the TRC.

A secondary interest of this thesis is in the remaking of memory and the part played by portrayals of the police. Chapter three anticipates the literary move toward the remaking of memory. The writers considered all used realist fiction to revise literary representations of the police under apartheid (John Miles and WPB Botha) and colonialism (AHM Scholtz). Through their police officer subjects they turn attention to Afrikaner responsibility for apartheid and challenge Afrikaner notions of supremacy and entitlement by usurping existing myths and reimagining silenced memories.

The thesis concludes with an analysis of post-apartheid crime fiction. Rather than considering works that have contributed to the more recent flooding of the literary market, my focus is on the earlier works of Deon Meyer and Margie Orford and the first post-apartheid work of Wessel Ebersohn, published up to 2010, in which the writers reveal the generic difficulty in situating the image of the police officer,

damaged by apartheid, in the emerging fictional form. Despite the hope engendered by democracy a decreasing confidence in the police is evident in these writers' works as they evolve from the police procedural to the thriller. Certainly the generic shift is consistent with a global preoccupation with the thriller, but the threats to society and the inadequacy of the police are given a distinctly South African flavour.

## Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Keryl Howie

17 November 2016

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