

Title: Crimes against Nature: Ecocritical Discourse in South African Crime Fiction

Abstract:

Heeding Patrick Murphy's call to critics, in his book *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries and Field* (2009,) to study "nature-oriented mystery novels ... in order to understand the degree to which environmental consciousness and nature awareness has permeated popular and commercial fiction" (143), this article examines how highly successful author, Deon Meyer, has employed crime fiction to popularise ecological issues and debates in South Africa. In this article, Meyer's first 'nature-oriented' novel, the crime thriller, *Blood Safari* (2009) is analysed. The main question asked is whether South African crime fiction deploys ecocritical discourse for mercenary reasons or whether its engagement with environmental issues constitutes a bona fide sub-category of ecocritical literature. The same rationale, that is understanding how "environmental consciousness and nature awareness" manifest in one of the most popular and commercially viable genres of fiction in South Africa today, informs the broader study from which this article is drawn. Some of the findings of this study, which includes a reading of Meyer's second 'nature-oriented' novel, *Trackers* (2011), Jane Taylor's *Of Wild Dogs*, Margaret von Klemperer's *Just A Dead Man*, and Ingrid Winterbach's *The Book of Happenstance*, are referred to briefly. To conclude, the contribution of 'nature-oriented' crime fiction to a 'localised ecocriticism' is assessed.

Key Words: ecocriticism; nature-oriented literature; South African crime fiction; Deon Meyer

Introduction

Previously, in an article entitled “The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism”, Murphy explained his interest in the relationship between “science fiction and literary realism and referentiality” (2001: 263). Quite simply, perhaps even obviously, Murphy points to an intrinsic link between writing and reading and “people thinking about the world in which they live” (*ibid*). Although he would not classify science fiction as nature writing, he does make a case for such genre fiction being recognised as “nature-oriented literature” (*ibid*). Nature-oriented literature is defined by Murphy rather loosely as:

... an aesthetic text that, on the one hand, directs reader attention toward the natural world and human interaction with other aspects of nature within that world, and, on the other hand, makes specific environmental issues part of the plots and themes of various works.

(Murphy 2001: 263)

Crucially, Murphy makes a distinction between nature-oriented literature, and environmental literature which he describes as literary works that are “anti- or de-anthropocentric” (2001: 264). For readers who are familiar with either *Blood Safari* or *Trackers* (2011) by Meyer, it will be apparent that these texts could be categorised as ‘nature-oriented’ literature: the reader’s attention is directed towards the natural world and topical environmental issues in South Africa; those topics and issues are woven into the plot, often providing the all-important motive required in a crime novel; and they become the themes of the texts – an opportunity for social, political and ecological commentary to converge. What one has to bear in mind, though, is that Meyer is a crime thriller author, and the conventions of the crime thriller genre, not the fact that they are ‘nature-oriented’ determine the form of these narratives. As such, the emphasis

in these novels is definitely on 'human interaction'. They are anthropocentric narratives with the detective occupying centre-stage, and 'specific environmental issues' or crimes against nature inform the plots and themes without necessarily becoming focal elements of the narratives. As in most crime fiction, in *Blood Safari* human motivations, human action and human concerns with justice and morality predominate. Individual transgressions, social ills and environmental wrong-doings are shown to be linked under the banner 'crime' and it is the role of the hero-detective of a crime thriller novel to solve crime and vanquish criminals.

This imbrication of environmental and socio-political concerns in literature, is of course, what South African ecocritical scholars such as Julia Martin (1992) and Anthony Vital (2005) having been calling attention to for a while now. Both Martin and Vital emphasise the need for a localised ecocriticism, one strongly informed by developments in the more general field of postcolonial ecocriticism, which is sensitive to the history of both human and environmental exploitation in this region. Steenkamp, in her study of South African speculative fiction, notes that "a localised ecocriticism does not attempt to dismiss the complex and violent history of conservationism in South Africa, but rather suggest ways in which the tension between ecological and humanistic concerns can be negotiated" (2011: 36). In *Blood Safari* what is apparent is that Meyer does employ "an approach to ecology which remains aware of local needs, histories and concerns" whilst "responding to global discourses of exploitation and inequality" (*ibid*). For this reason, the fact that Meyer combines socio-cultural, historical and environmental concerns in *Blood Safari*, it is possible to regard the text as more than just nature-oriented genre fiction but also as postcolonial ecocritical crime fiction or post-apartheid

crime fiction. How successfully Meyer combines these concerns, and thus how worthy the text is of these taxonomies, will be addressed through analysis of the novel.

To return to Murphy, the concern is not only with the content and form of the nature-oriented text, he also questions what *effect* this literature has on the reader. Does the literature offer pedestrian lessons, how is environmental activism portrayed, is the information reliable, does the literature “cause readers to rethink their relationship to nature and culture” (2001: 269) or does it “provide them with an alibi to continue living their lives without assuming responsibility for the health of the biosphere” (2001: 267)? The latter question is directed at texts which suggest that media hype and eco-pessimists are responsible for exaggerating the ecological crisis the planet faces. These questions about effect are well worth applying to *Blood Safari* in the ensuing analysis. Despite these many questions, which perhaps are answered only through analyses of individual texts, Murphy concludes that “[S]uch works can turn readers’ attention toward the major socioenvironmental issues facing humanity today” (2001: 277). Turning or capturing readers’ attention to ‘major socioenvironmental issue’s is fait accompli for *Blood Safari* which won the the German Krimi Award in 2009 and the inaugural ATKV Prize for Best Suspense Fiction in 2008.¹

What of South African crime fiction’s credibility and literary status? Is it ‘highbrow’ enough to produce the effects Murphy outlines? Already arguments have been made for the post-apartheid crime novel being the new political novel in South Africa.² This claim is based on a number of factors: crime fiction is widely read in South Africa today; it is an accessible genre; every crime fiction novel engages with burning socio-political themes of the present or is concerned with excavating the crimes of the past; the authors are clearly attempting to

interpret the ills of contemporary South African society, that is, these texts hold hermeneutic value; and most of this literature, with its forceful and compelling content, offers excoriating criticism of the status quo, especially of pervasive and overwhelming crime which affects every facet of society. With the solving of crime and the uncovering of criminals as its main imperative, crime fiction in general, it would seem, is an ideal platform for the investigation of crimes against nature. In South Africa, the nature-oriented crime novel has the potential to be a highly effective ecocritical tool, turning readers into environmentally aware and socially responsible citizens. Ah, but here is the rub! The main sub-genre of crime fiction, the crime thriller novel,³ of which *Blood Safari* is a prime example, due to its formulaic nature and promise to ‘thrill’ cannot always be guaranteed to edify, reform and conscientise. In fact, detractors of crime fiction are quick to point out this ambiguous ideological positioning of a genre which is aimed at maximum accessibility, popularity and profits. Consequently, what this article explores is the ambiguity of the nature-oriented crime novel. Is it a viable ecological tool or is it exploiting environmental issues to create a sensational plot and topical themes?

Natural Born Thrillers

Oliver Stone and Quentin Tarantino’s cult movie, *Natural Born Killers* (1994) about a pair of lovers who become travelling serial killers and then national celebrities, has been described as an attempted parody of “America's media culture of voyeurism and violence”.⁴ This movie highlights the entertainment value or the ‘thrill’ of blood and gore. The most depraved characters and the most outlandish plots are what sell. Similar to the thriller movie, the crime thriller novel, a sub-genre of crime fiction, is characterized by: a formulaic, fast-paced plot;

more action than detection, graphic often gratuitous violence; and a climactic chase or physical show-down to conclude. South African crime thrillers mainly conform to these conventions and are in their overall focus anthropomorphic despite texts such *Blood Safari*, *Trackers* or Jane Taylor's *Of Wild Dogs* (2005) being nature-oriented.

Most crime thriller novels are strongly influenced by American hard-boiled crime fiction and its derivatives, which were intensely concerned with the human condition in a dystopian world born of two world wars. Authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler made popular short, urban-based fiction with a tough-guy protagonist which reflected the raw social reality of American cities in the 1920s. Barbara Stanners describes the period as: "... marked by disillusionment, cynicism and social insecurity. Prohibition, economic and political instability had resulted in the growth of gangsterism, lawlessness and corruption" (2007: 65). Except for the prohibition, this may well be a description of post-apartheid South Africa two decades after the optimism and euphoria caused by the birth of democracy have waned. In hard-boiled crime fiction, rather than solving a puzzle by ratiocination mainly, the protagonist embarks on an adventure or quest, relying on his wits and his physical prowess for survival in a hostile world. Traditionally the hero is a lone investigator (a *Private Investigator*). The plots are complex with twists and turns as the hero plunges deeper and deeper into the dangerous, murky world of crime, creating tension and suspense. This mythic or archetypal journey often results in a world-weary cynicism as the protagonist temporarily loses his way and finds his moral compass compromised. In traditional hard-boiled texts the settings and milieu are bleak, sleazy and ugly. Run-down bars, depressing tenement blocks and general urban decay are evoked to mirror social disorder.

Similarly, the South African crime thriller novel (Meyer is arguably the most well-known and commercially successful South African crime thriller author), also evokes an urban dystopia, a setting of menace and despair. The majority of novels are set in Cape Town. The badlands of the Cape Flats or the bleakness of the townships are contrasted with the spectacular natural beauty of the city and its environs, a beauty which is shown to be a veneer temporarily masking a seething cesspool of crime and corruption. Where they differ most markedly from early hard-boiled fiction is in their attempts to represent the beauty of the broader South African landscape. Many of these novels also contain elements of *literary tourism* which lure the reader beyond the boundaries of the Mother City. Meyer's novels include panoramic descriptions of the countryside: a car or motorbike journey through the Karoo, redolent with local history and flavour; descriptions of the bank of the Breede River, the stage for a scene of violent combat; an evocative portrait of the Lowveld and the two-million-hectare Kruger National Park; or a thrilling account of a tense road trip from Musina on the border with Zimbabwe to Loxton in the Great Karoo. This natural beauty is not presented merely as a backdrop. Rather, nature and human appreciation of it is often portrayed as a counterpoint to the violent crimes and wanton destruction committed by the 'baddies' of these narratives. Moreover, in *Blood Safari*, the abuse of the land and its resources by various parties is held up for sustained scrutiny, albeit within the constraints of the crime thriller formula.

However, Henriette Roos is not entirely inaccurate in observing that in *Blood Safari*, the "setting of bush and veld and the environmental conflicts are in the first instance props, despite the ecological message" (2011: 67). It is worth bearing in mind that in the crime thriller, with its conventions, is basically anthropomorphic. The emphasis is ultimately on human action and human

perspectives and the use of natural settings as 'props' does not necessarily efface the value of the ecocritical discourse. For Roos, the "description of landscape and environment functions in support of human activities ..." and she concludes that "the relationship between man and nature [is] exploited to create a plausible background for the action-stacked plot" (65). What Roos fails to take adequate cognisance of is the text's *form*. Murphy's formulation proves increasingly useful as a distinction can be made between Roos's preferred 'environmental literature', and 'nature-oriented literature' which "directs reader attention toward the natural world and human interaction with other aspects of nature within that world, and, ... makes specific environmental issues part of the plots and themes of various works" (Murphy 2001: 263). While thrilling the reader with its plot, *Blood Safari* also fosters environmental awareness, explores the relationship between humans and their natural environment, and interrogates how crimes against nature are linked to other forms of crime. But it must be conceded that in the crime thriller, ecocritical discourse is rarely nuanced, foregrounded or particularly radical as the pressure of a fast-paced, action-packed plot in which the hero triumphs over (annihilates) the criminals takes precedence.

Blood Safari is undoubtedly a crime thriller in the hard-boiled tradition, and is arguably a nature-oriented crime thriller. Lemmer, the hero-detective, a lone protagonist with a past tainted by violence, embarks on a literal and figurative journey which leads him into direct confrontation with a variety of dangerous foes, including those who commit murder in the name of conservation. Lemmer, in his pursuit of justice, has to overcome many obstacles, not least of all the one's posed by nature. Although a good and moral man who is opposed to all crimes and injustices, Lemmer is not specifically concerned with the environment. In the novel, nature often does function as mere setting for Lemmer's exploits, and the Lowveld is described as an exotic locale as part of Meyer's brand of literary tourism. Yet, at the same time the novel

raises very serious topics such as the endangered White-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) and the tensions which exist between conservationists indigenous peoples seeking land rights. Roos's criticism ignores that *Blood Safari* is a crime thriller novel which weaves ecological discourse into its crime thriller plot, and is not primarily an environmental novel. What is really of interest here is Meyer's attempt to synthesise ecocriticism with the conventions of the genre, just as his combination of socio-cultural, historical and environmental concerns points to the inscription of an innovative, multifaceted crime fiction - an approach which potentially adds weight to the contention that the crime novel is the 'new political novel' in South Africa.

Bloody Battles of *Blood Safari*

As mentioned, Meyer does more than describe appealing locales thereby giving readers the opportunity to be literary tourists in South Africa. In *Blood Safari* Meyer presents the reader with an ecological crisis in the Kruger Park region. Four local men have been murdered and accompanying their bodies are the remains of fourteen protected and endangered vultures. This incident sparks a series of dangerous and violent episodes in which personal body guard/investigator, Lemmer, assists a young woman, Emma Le Roux, who wishes to trace her long-lost, believed-to-be-dead brother, who seems to be implicated in these murders. What Lemmer and Emma discover when they arrive in the Lowveld is that a bloody battle is raging between a local 'tribe', the Sibashwa who have made a huge land claim against the Kruger Park,⁵ and a group of conservationists working at the Mogale Rehabilitation Centre. Frank Wolhuter, the manager of the centre belligerently sums up the situation:

‘... Forty bloody land claims against the game reserve. What for? So they can destroy that, too? Just go and see what the blacks have done with the farms they got here in the Lowveld ... It was prime land; successful, productive white farmers had to get off, and now it’s wasteland, the people are dying of hunger. Everything is broken – the borehole pumps, the irrigation pipes, the tractors ... Chop up the park in forty bits of tribal land and that’s the end ... White guys. Skinny little city slickers in collar and tie, with dollar signs in their eyes and “Development” on their business cards. They feel nothing for conservation. They haven’t come to uplift the people. They come here and seduce the people. ... The people are so poor, they want to believe in it, they are blinded.’

(2009: 74-5)

Wolhuter’s diatribe appears racist or as Roos puts it “a colonial culture [that] permeates the fictional world” (2011: 67). But the main target of Wolhuter’s criticism is big business – the predominantly white-owned national and international property development companies which exploit the poverty of the land claimants and who are the main perpetrators of crimes against nature. Also, Wolhuter and his ilk are subjected to a similar scrutiny. Contrary to Roos’s claim that the novel “adheres to more traditional perspectives on wilderness ‘management’ (game reserves, rehabilitation centres, game rangers)” (2011: 67), this is a novel which questions conservations methods and is highly critical of certain discourses of environmental activism. Even the hero-protagonist, Lemmer’s scepticism, ignorance and complacency with regard environmental issues are reproached.

In an earlier chapter Lemmer and Emma take a tour of the Mogale Rehabilitation Centre and here they are given a lecture on vultures by a young conservationist, Donnie Branca. This entire chapter is devoted to Branca’s speech which is focalised through Lemmer, the first-person narrator of the novel:

‘If we poison them, if Escom’s power cables kill them when they dive into them, if the farmers shoot them or take away their breeding grounds, the ticking of God’s clock will stop. Not only for them, ladies and gentlemen, but also for all of nature. Rotting carcasses breed blowflies and disease, which spreads to mammals, reptiles and other birds. Often to human beings as well. Food chains get broken, the delicate balance is disturbed, and the whole system comes crashing down. That’s why we care for vultures at Mogale, that’s why we love them. ...’

(2009: 65)

This rhetoric of Branca’s, a combination of fervent conservation with not altogether sound science and rather schmaltzy marketing, continues for six pages. The tourists (and the readers) are given an informative and moving account of the plight of the endangered vulture. But Meyer interrupts and undercuts Branca’s discourse by inserting Lemmer’s, perspective:

I realised of whom the man reminded me. There had been a lay preacher in jail, a born-again armed robber from the Cape Flats by the name of Job Tieties. Bible in hand, he would preach at night, to himself and a handful of approving brothers. His voice carried through the cells with that same urgent, evangelistic fervour.

(2009: 63)

For the moment Lemmer does not voice his scepticism but Branca’s brand of activism is called into question by this comparison with a criminal-turned-evangelist figure from Lemmer’s past. This, together with Branca’s zeal, serves as a foreshadowing. Later in the novel, in a confrontation with Branca and another ‘eco-warrior’, Stef Moller, the topic of global warming arises. Lemmer, it seems, is ill-informed and dismissive: “I had heard this old wife’s tale before. I shook my head in disbelief” (274). Branca retaliates with an outburst against Lemmer’s ignorance and complacency:

Your're just like everybody. The media, the government, the fucking public, everybody is in denial. You have no idea what's happening, Lemmer. ... I dare you, go do your homework. Go look at the facts. Go read the scientific material. All of it. Not just climate change. Everything. Loss of habitat, deforestation, population growth, pollution, land abuse, urban sprawl, development, poaching, smuggling, poverty, globalisation. And then come back and tell me there's no crisis.'

(2009: 277-8)

It comes as no surprise to the reader then that Branca has resorted to violence to address the crisis he refers to in this speech. It is also significant that Meyer has chosen to portray his detective as somewhat lacking in environmental awareness, at the start of the narrative anyway.

In *Blood Safari* Meyer has created characters who are emblematic of a certain brand of environmental activism: Donnie Branca, a passionate, evangelical activist who escalates to commits acts of eco-terrorism (218-9); Frank Wolhuter, who sees money and greed as the root of all crimes against nature; Stef Moller the millionaire who believes that the main threats to the environment are "political and financial", referring to South Africa's ever-expanding tourist industry, but who remains silent about the origins of his own fortune (97); and Cobie De Villiers, a compatriot of Branca's who "calls humanity the greatest plague the planet has ever known" (78), and who is indeed Emma's long lost brother. What all of these characters have in common, and Lemmer is inadvertently co-opted into this cause, is a hatred of the collusion between big business and government in the 'development' of the land, to the detriment of both the poor local communities and the environment.

Initially, standing alone, and in contrast to these eco-warriors, is Lemmer, the anti-social, environmentally unaware, violent, bodyguard-investigator who is plagued by his poor

Afrikaans past. As the crime thriller plot unfolds, it is Lemmer who uncovers why the four men and the fourteen vultures were killed and why Jacobus Le Roux aka Cobie De Villiers has been on the run since 1986. Behind the murders and the mayhem which span two decades is big business, a “privately owned Stellenbosch weapons systems developer Southern Cross Avionics” (350) which provided the apartheid government with the ballistic missile that shot down Samora Machal’s plane on 19 October 1986. It is Lemmer who ‘neutralises’ the unscrupulous businessman and his henchmen, it is Lemmer who returns, after these thrilling events to his chosen quiet, simple life in the Great Karoo town of Loxton where he can contemplate his place in the universe:

There is a spot on this route, a rise beyond the last stock gate at Jakalsdans, where millions of years of geological forces have piled massive rocks on top of one another like beacons. On either side the Karoo lies open, and I go and stand there to gain perspective of our place in the universe. We are small, insignificant, invisible if you draw back, away from earth, the solar system, the Milky Way.

(2009: 372)

With this insight, the reader is given an intimation of Lemmer’s relationship with nature and he is partially redeemed for his initial arrogance and for not being apprised of the facts about global warming. The above introspective lines also recall Murphy’s definition of nature-oriented literature. In this novel, such rhetoric directs readers’ attention toward human interaction with nature, toward the natural world mainly through lengthy descriptions of the setting, and toward wider interactions within that world seen in the standpoints of various characters and in the criminal schemes which drive the plot. It is also possible to apply Murphy’s more specific questions about the effect of nature-oriented literature to this text.

Because the novel does not offer facile solutions to the ecological problems described but rather presents them as complex issues with complicated historical roots, the “literature [does not] offer pedestrian lessons” (Murphy 2001: 269). Environmental activism is portrayed as a noble ideal which is often flawed in practice, and it is very likely that the reader, who is expected to sympathise with the protagonist, will, like Lemmer “rethink their relationship to nature and culture” (ibid). Meyer’s melange of ecocriticism and crime fiction, however is not merely mercenary nor is it as straightforward as Roos contends (2011: 65, 67-8).

If Meyer is critical of the fundamentalism of eco-warriors why has he created a hero who also resorts to extreme violence in the face of a crisis, and who in many respects shares their sentiments even if he chooses to express them very differently? Whilst critiquing this type of environmental activism Meyer is equally committed to raising awareness of various other ecological issues as he is to exposing governmental and corporate corruption. He provides, often quite didactically through his mouth-piece characters, copious information for the reader, and he raises debates and differing points of view. For example, Inspector Jack Phatudi ‘speaks’ on behalf of the Sibashwa tribe. He explains to Emma Le Roux that there are in fact only eight land claims (thereby asserting that the conservationists are exaggerating), he describes how his people were driven off the land in 1889 by force and without compensation, and most significantly, he clarifies that the land claimants are not anti-conservation, they do not want land within the Kruger Park but alongside it. Phatudi also makes an emotive argument:

‘ ... Our ancestors are buried there, a thousand years of graves, but they just took the ground and said we must go. Now the people ... all they are saying is, “Let us make right the wrong.”’

And he makes a strong defence against the slaughter of endangered animals:

‘ ... Tell me, madam, who killed the animals in this country? Who hunted the quagga until not one was left? And the Knysna elephant? The black people? ...
Look at the people of the Limpopo, madam. Look where they live. Look how they struggle. There are no jobs, there is no money, and there is no land. ...
Why did the Boer make the Kruger Park? Because they, the whites, had killed nearly everything and they wanted to save the last few. ...’

(115)

This position in relation to the environment expressed by Phatudi, as controversial as it may seem, is one that many South Africans share. Julia Martin pointed this out in 1992:

The majority of South Africans have reason to find environmental-friendliness unpalatable, tasting as it so often does of white privilege and forced removals. What does saving the rhinos, rain forests and the ozone layer have to do with poverty and oppression, anyway?

(Martin 1992: 74)

The advice that Martin gives to ecocritical scholars is that “we need to begin by acknowledging that most people in this country have historical justification for seeing ecological issues as irrelevant, and even inimical, to the struggle for social and political justice” (1993: 76). Meyer, being critical of certain types of environmental activism and sympathetic to a more anthropomorphic standpoint, may well be making this acknowledgment, and furthermore, he seems primarily concerned with depicting the links between ecological, social and political issues.

Therefore he brings together in this nature-oriented novel social, political and ecocritical themes, and attempts to show how intricately they are imbricated, rather than impose a dominant ecocritical discourse onto the narrative. As previously observed, the conventions of

the crime thriller are also responsible for this array of themes. For these reasons, the combined exigencies of a socio-political stance and of a commercial literary project, Meyer's detective-hero, Lemmer, stands for 'truth' and justice in a general sense and is without a specific ecological cause or battle. Murphy may well accuse Meyer of thus creating in this novel an excuse to side-step environmental responsibility but the character Lemmer is hardly an alibi⁶ for the reader. He single-handedly does battle against the connivance of corrupt politicians and unscrupulous business tycoons (thus indirectly also fighting on behalf of the environment), and wins, albeit with a ferocious and thrilling violence befitting of a crime thriller. This combination of themes and form, for many readers and critics across the globe, is an undeniable success.

There is no escaping that *Blood Safari* is indeed ideologically ambiguous. On the one hand, Meyer does 'turn readers' attention toward the major socioenvironmental issues facing humanity' today whilst on the other hand, he utilises a complex crisis to create a thrilling novel with all of the generic conventions which guarantee maximum sales. Is there any way of ascertaining the effect on the reader? Once the thrill has worn off, does the reader care about the endangered vultures or the Sibashwa tribe of the Limpopo? Although nearly impossible to answer, these are questions are worth asking of popular and commercial fiction which engages with ecocritical discourse. This reading of *Blood Safari* was intended as a first step towards understanding how ecocritical discourse and the crime fiction genres meld in South Africa today. The findings, that Meyer's deployment of ecocritical discourse, although moulded to the formulaic demands of the genre, is not glib or gimmicky, are encouraging. A nature-oriented crime thriller novel such as *Blood Safari* does deliver the thrill but, with its structural and thematic engagements with socioenvironmental issues, it also offers the reader

information, basic ideas, different perspectives, criticism – an ecological a starter-kit with which to fight crimes against nature.

Conclusion

This inclusion of ecocritical discourse in crime fiction texts is not exclusive to *Blood Safari*. In *Trackers* (2011), Meyer's second nature-oriented novel, he employs a similar narrative strategy. The novel engages with the plight of black rhino, and pivotal to the plot is an attempt to smuggle a pair of rhino from Zimbabwe to South Africa, an operation which becomes enmeshed in organised crime and Islamic extremism. Again, the motif of the journey allows for evocative descriptions of varying terrains and habitats. But what *Trackers* includes and *Blood Safari* lacks is a character who is an environmental activist but who possesses nuanced localised knowledge, who is both passionate and sensitive, motivated by justice for the land and all its human and non-human inhabitants. This character, John Ehrlichmann aka Shumba, is described rather humorously and with a hint of satire, as a "clean-shaven Moses in safari gear" (2011: 176) and is compared to Rafiki from *The Lion King*. Ehrlichmann who is instrumental in saving the pair of rhino, is a dignified, sober and sagacious conservationist who is highly critical of Mugabe's dictatorship and is actually smuggling arms to the white farmers of Zimbabwe.

This interweaving of social, political and environmental concerns can also be found in Jane Taylor's *Of Wild Dogs* (2005) which centres on the murder of Hannah Viljoen, a curator and illustrator at the Natural History Museum in Cape Town. Using a detective trio (Ewan Christopher, a British journalist, Cicero Matyobeni, a policeman from Khayalitsha, and Helena de Villiers, a pathologist) to investigate the central crime, Taylor expands the narrative to

critically comment on the impact of unscrupulous business ventures on the grasslands of the Limpopo, and specifically on its dwindling population of wild dogs:

The animals' numbers are plummeting. Parvovirus, contracted from sickly feral domestic dogs, and sprawling human encroachment are decimating their numbers. The rise in lion populations, too, threatens their place in the eco-balance. Sentiments must swing in their favour.

(2005: 8-9)

Although Hannah's murder cannot be attributed to Oranje Alluvial, the mining company which created a bogus "wildlife project" (2005: 92) in the Limpopo corridor, it is clear that this company is the main 'criminal' in the plot. The CEO and accountant of Oranje Alluvial, together with the henchmen they employ are responsible for the murder of two scientists who have been researching the wild dogs, and are guilty of denying the historical land rights of the indigenous people of the area. Strong censure is articulated against such companies which mask their exploitative, criminal activities with false environmentalism:

'We will want him to help us broker a deal that demonstrates how land rights, national parks and traditional ownership can work harmoniously for the collective good. These green lobbyists who see us as the enemy choose to ignore the role played by industry in the stewardship of conservation.'

(2005 139)

In this nature-oriented novel, the various strands of the plot converge but the motivations for, and nature of, the crimes committed are manifold. The reader is confronted with crimes against nature as a result of greed and wanton self-aggrandisement but these crimes are presented alongside ones caused by personal obsession and aberrant psychologies. The overall effect is

that of a web with human criminal activity at the centre and all victims, human and non-human, interconnected.

A similar effect is achieved in Margaret von Klemperer's *Just a Dead Man* (2012) in which an unlikely detective in the form of a suburban art teacher becomes embroiled in the machinations of government officials and industry heavy-weights intent on developing titanium mining on the Pondoland coast. But although this novel presents a potential ecological crisis as the primary cause of the central crime, the murder of Phineas Ndzoyiya, it cannot be described as a nature-oriented novel:

He [the murder victim] had uncovered a whole lot about Mchunu and his involvement in companies that were buying up land and well-connected figures aiming to get a toehold into titanium mining, and make a fortune. ...

Adam explained that environmental assessment stated that mining in the area would do irreparable damage: then there other claiming it would be minimal, as long as a bit of rehabilitation was done.

(2012: 238)

Not much more is said about the impact of titanium mining on the environment except for general comments about the disruption that such development would cause to human settlements and the iniquitous control of these resources by a few wealthy, powerful, and as it turns out, criminal, individuals. The novel stops short of interrogating the human-nature relationship in this context or of providing factual information for the reader to consider. Ecocritical discourse does not permeate the narrative but emerges briefly in the denouement in order to explain the chain of events which led to the murders of Phineas Ndzoyiya and his son.

Even more subtle, perhaps is the inclusion of ecocritical discourse in Ingrid Winterbach's *The Book of Happenstance* (2008). The central crime in this novel is the theft of Helena

Verbloem's collection of shells from her garden flat. A carpet is also defiled with urine and excrement. Clearly not a crime thriller this novel does borrow elements from crime and detective fiction and can be categorised as a "literary detective novel" (Naidu 2013: ?). The central crime which appears senseless and without motive, functions as a warning or a catalyst for Helena, and it does form the mysterious core of the narrative. Together with her new friend, Sof Benade, Helena attempts to solve the mystery of the stolen shells but she is overcome by loss. The loss of the shells is metonymic and soon Helena is overcome by a more general, existential sense of loss. She also tries to engage Constable Modisane's help, as well as that of Jaykie Steinmeier, in her quest to retrieve the shells.

In the tradition of detective or crime fiction, Helena and Sof comprise a detective duo with the aptly-named Sof being the wise side-kick and Helena being the obsessed detective. There are many clues, for example, the 'signs' of human excretion on the carpet and the lingering fragrance of Hugo Boss aftershave in the flat. There are red herrings such as the dead Patrick Steinmeier and the duo embarks on a journey – in fact they travel twice to Ladybrand to conduct their investigations. However, as the crime is not solved in a conventional sense and eventually comes to be side-lined in favour of Helena's concern with the meaning of human existence, the use of these genre elements, it can be said, constitutes anti-detective fiction

There are other mysteries woven into the narrative. What is Theo Verwey up to in his double life? Is he having a homosexual relationship with Sailor which causes his financial ruin? Also, what causes Verwey's fatal heart attack in October? As is often the case in anti-detective fiction, these questions, like the central mystery of the stolen shells, remain unanswered but serve as stimuli for the protagonist's existential and metaphysical ruminations. Ultimately,

Helena finds herself questioning the origins of human life, and contemplating the various scientific facts and theories which attempt to address that question. In this nature-oriented novel the crime forces Helena to confront her past, the people she has encountered and the impact they have had on her life, and how she comes to be here and now – inhabiting the moment in which the shells are stolen. Ecocritical discourse takes the form of a profound representation of one individual's quest to work out her position in the universe.

Reminiscent of Lemmer's insight about human insignificance at the end of *Blood Safari* but far more complexly and intellectually wrought, Helena grapples with theories of evolution and her own conceptualisations of fate, destiny and coincidence. In a section near the close of the novel Helena watches a film which reconstructs "what earth might look like in a hundred million or two hundred million years from now – based on research done in palaeontology and evolutionary biology" (2008: 317). Crucially, what Helena focuses on in this projected world is that everything "that was humanlike or human or created by humans has gone (through our own efforts, or assisted by uncontrollable natural forces" (2008: 319). Through an ingenious and understated use of the detective and mystery genres, in combination with an ecocritical discourse which is anthropomorphic whilst simultaneously gesturing to a universe free of "every trace of human presence" (ibid) Winterbach has created a nature-oriented South African crime fiction novel which is unique in its scope. *The Book of Happenstance* is essentially a novel of ideas, including deep ecological ones: ideas about language and lexicography, the history of the planet, evolution, destiny and free will, biology and beauty, and most of all it is about loss - of shells, of one's human bonds and of equilibrium.

In South African crime fiction which incorporates ecocritical discourses there are some common preoccupations. The history of colonisation and settlement and its impact on the environment and on the indigenous peoples, as well as the socioenvironmental consequences of apartheid feature as interlinked causes of crime. Even in formulaic crime fiction such as the crime thriller, ecocritical discourse is utilised to address environmental ethics, individual relations with nature and with others, perhaps even to shift consciousness through raising different points of view, as seen in Meyer's *Blood Safari*. Environmental activism in its various forms does not escape interrogation and social transformation is not regarded without also considering its impact on the environment. Yet at the same time that this nature-oriented crime fiction is lauded for its social, political and environmental analysis, it has to be acknowledged that ecological topics are exploited to fulfil generic conventions or end up playing second-fiddle to them. In the less formula-bound literary detective novel there is more scope for in-depth treatment of a specific ecocritical theme, although these texts lack the wider, popular appeal of the crime thriller. Whatever form the South African nature-oriented crime fiction novel takes, the inclusion of ecological concerns serves to amplify those concerns rather than mute them.

End Notes

1. See Deon Meyer's official website. <http://www.deonmeyer.com/bio.html> retrieved on 09 January 2014.
2. See *SlipNet* (Stellenbosch Literary Project). This website, maintained by the Department of English, Stellenbosch University, has been the site of the most in depth and cutting-edge debates about South African crime fiction in the past three years. <http://SlipNet.co.za/?s=genre+snob+debate> retrieved on 18 January 2013.
3. See Naidu (2013) for the formal categorisation of South African crime fiction into two main sub-genres: the crime thriller novel and the literary detective novel.

4. See Tom Keogh's editorial review. <http://www.amazon.com/Natural-Born-Killers-Woody-Harrelson/dp/6303327982> retrieved on 09 January 2014.

5. On 09 January 2014 President Jacob Zuma announced a land claim settlement in favour of the N'wandlamhlari Community Property Association, Mpumalanga Province. The settlement includes the Mala Mala Game Reserve, one of the oldest reserves in the Kruger region and the landowners were paid nearly R1 billion in compensation. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Zuma-hands-over-Mala-Mala-20140109> retrieved 10 January 2014.

6. Alibi in the sense that Murphy uses the term – providing readers “with an alibi to continue living their lives without assuming responsibility for the health of the biosphere” (2001: 267).

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