

# The Emergence of the South African Farm Crime Novel: Socio-Historical Crimes, Personal Crimes, and the Figure of the Dog

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## ABSTRACT

Crime fiction is an established and popular literary genre in South Africa that has gained international recognition and acclaim. The genre continues to expand and develop in terms of thematic concerns and experiments in form. One such notable development is the farm crime novel, which extends the tradition of the South African *plaasroman*. Recent texts, such as Elaine Proctor's *The Savage Hour* and Karin Brynard's *Weeping Waters*, quite deliberately set their respective murder mysteries on remote farms, and both novels particularise details of farm life. This article argues that the main concerns of the farm crime novel are, on one level, socio-historical – that is, the crimes perpetrated are the result of relationships to the land, land claims and land re-distribution, and the complex, evolving relationship between landowner and labourer. On another level, true to the conventions of crime fiction, the farm crime novel also explores interpersonal or intimate relationships that result in crimes of passion. Of particular interest is the observation that common to both thematic levels is a profound rendering of the link between human-animal relations and human-human relations. Drawing on Karla Armbruster's work on the cultural significance of narratives about dogs and the need for more just and ethical relationships

with animals, the article then demonstrates how this rendering occurs, often, through the figure of the dog. To conclude, some comments are offered on the position of the farm crime novel in a post-apartheid literary landscape.

### **Introduction: The Farm Crime Novel – Extending the *Plaasroman* Tradition**

Crime fiction is an established and popular literary genre in South Africa, and one that has gained international recognition and acclaim.<sup>1</sup> The genre continues to expand and develop in terms of thematic concerns and experiments in form. Recent texts, such as Elaine Proctor's *The Savage Hour* and Karin Brynard's *Weeping Waters*, deliberately set their respective murder mysteries on remote farms, and both novels particularise details of farm life. By tracing this notable development in the genre, and by describing it as the emergence of the farm crime novel, this article intends to contribute to the mapping of South African crime fiction as a *bona fide* literary genre with a complex and variegated lineage. I argue that the main concerns of the farm crime novel are, on one level, socio-historical, that the crimes perpetrated are the result of relationships to the land, land claims and land re-distribution, and the complex, evolving relationship between landowner and labourer. On another level, true to the conventions of crime fiction, the farm crime novel also explores interpersonal or intimate relationships that result in often lurid crimes of passion. Of particular interest is the observation that common to both thematic levels is a profound rendering of the link between human-animal relations and human-human relations.

In the farm crime novel, the setting or central image of the farm is historically ambiguous. A posited relationship between past and present crimes is crucially significant to the narrative, in terms of both form and content. An obvious example of such a farm crime novel is Andrew Brown's *Coldsleep Lullaby* (2005), which has two narrative strands, one of them set in present-day Stellenbosch, and the other set on a colonial wine farm in the

seventeenth century. Although forming slightly less than half of the narrative, this historical strand offers the reader a vivid account of the agricultural development of the land along the Eerste Rivier during the governorship of Simon van der Stel, as well as a chilling story of abuse, rape and murder on a farm run by slave-owning viticulturist Martin van der Keesel. Details of farm life in the seventeenth century enrich the narrative, accompanied by a description of the fraught relations between masters and slaves, and between the Dutch East India Company and the freeburghers of the colony. The landscape as it was in the seventeenth century is also rendered in some detail, evoking the idyllic and fertile surroundings of the newly-established settlement at Stellenbosch. With a deft twist of the plot, Brown links the two chronological strands, drawing parallels between the violent crimes of the past and the various gender-based and racially motivated crimes besetting contemporary Stellenbosch. Interestingly, Claire Robertson deploys a similar narrative structure in *The Spiral House* (2014). This novel also has two chronological strands, one set on a remote farm, Vogelzang, in 1794, and the other on Mannamead Mission, a hospital run by nuns in the rural north of the country, in 1961. In the former strand, Katrijn van der Caab, freed slave and wigmaker's apprentice, witnesses some of the most heinous crimes perpetrated by slave-owners against their slaves whilst gaining an education about the domestic rituals and agricultural rhythms that govern farm life. The latter strand describes the travails of a nun, Sister Vergilius, who like Katrijn, also becomes entangled in racist crimes. What links these narrative strands set two hundred years apart is that both female protagonists are initially oppressed and subjugated by similar systems, and both eventually flee the taint and tentacles of crime to become emancipated in their respective milieux. While both *Coldsleep Lullaby* and *The Spiral House* utilise the farm setting only partially, the South African farm nevertheless looms large in these novels, poignantly beautiful and infested with crime.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly evident in these texts are remnants of the tradition of the *plaasroman*, and here, contrary to J. M. Coetzee's approach in "Farm Novel and *Plaasroman* in South Africa" (1986), I am conflating the *plaasroman* in Afrikaans with the farm novel genre in English to refer to the combined literature about farm and rural society in South Africa as the *plaasroman* tradition. This tradition includes older Afrikaans works by C. M. van den Heever and D. F. Malherbe, and English works by Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith. For Coetzee, writing in the 1980s, the main concern was that this literature contained "silence about the place of the black man [sic] in the pastoral idyll" (17). He singles out Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) for partially exorcising the "ghost of the pastoral" by exposing "the dark side of farm life, its buried half, the corpse in the garden" (16).

Recent crime fiction, such as Karin Brynard's *Weeping Waters* (2014), published originally in Afrikaans as *Plaasmoord* (2009), and Elaine Proctor's *The Savage Hour* (2014), make obvious use of this rich *plaasroman* tradition. Exploiting the farm setting more fully than Brown did in *Coldsleep Lullaby*, both these authors deliberately set their respective murder mysteries on remote farms, and both novels particularise details of farm life, simultaneously critiquing and idealising the concept of the South African farm. Another distinguishing feature of these farm crime novels is their conscientious portrayal of animals and of human-animal relations. Elements of the pastoral are retained but these are accompanied by unflinching accounts of historical and current injustices, and of intimate, personal crimes, that is, "the dark side of farm life." The argument, therefore, is that farm crime novels such as these extend the *plaasroman* tradition, bringing the trope of the South African farm into the twenty-first century and into a different genre, where it takes on new symbolism reflecting the exigencies of a post-transitional society. The "silences" that so troubled Coetzee have been filled with a cacophony of voices, some strident, some muted, some harmonious, even some non-human voices, but mostly they are voices in conflict. These

novels, as do other post-apartheid farm novels, such as Coetzee's *Disgrace*,<sup>3</sup> employ the eruption of violence as a plot device to represent the apogee of the various tense relationships among farm dwellers who have co-habited for centuries on land which is both life-giving and tainted by the twin blights of colonialism and apartheid.

### **The Symbol of the Farm**

In South African literature the symbol of the farm is old and contentious, having been utilised originally to inscribe a local novel writing tradition, with a nod to Romanticism and deeply steeped in colonial nationalism. Writing in 2001, Malvern van Wyk Smith describes the evolution and “the ambivalence in the iconology of the farm” (19):

If the farm was often fetishized in South African white writing [...] it is now more commonly demonized. No longer a focus for a rural epistemology of passionate intensity, a timeless space of regeneration and harmony, it is now a war zone, a limbo of menace and insecurity. Its isolation, simplicity, unprotectedness, scanty population, once the very spars of its appeal, are now the very makings of its vulnerability and insecurity. So the farm contains (but has always contained) within itself the causes of its undoing, and it is now discovered to harbour in its very being the demise of its (white) owner. Once the epitome of freedom, both in a psychic personal sense and in a national political ideology of self-determination, the farm is now both a trap and a prison. Implanting a fatal attraction and inspiring a murderous intention in those outside it, the farm is also a prison to those behind its arc lights and alarm systems, its electric and blade-wire fences.

(19)

The “national political ideology of self-determination” mentioned here is mainly that of the Afrikaans farmer intent on freedom from the yoke of British domination. In early avatars of the *plaasroman*,

the Romantic and pastoral appeal of the farm as a setting is evident, as is its political currency, being so closely intertwined with Afrikaner nationalism. A similar pastoralism is to be found in Pauline Smith's *The Beadle*, where the Van der Merwes' farm, Harmonie, is "fetishized" as an Eden-like centre for the rural and domestic community of the Aangenaam Valley. But even this pastoral idyll is disrupted when sin is unveiled and the "dark side of farm life," always present even if invisible or silent, rears its venomous head.

For the white farmer, van Wyk Smith rightly observes, there has been a shift from the farm being a site of freedom and self-sufficiency to its becoming a space of imprisonment and vulnerability. This reworking is expanded in the farm crime novel where it is shown that, for centuries, for the black farm worker, the farm has been "a war zone, a limbo of menace and insecurity." Van Wyk Smith continues by identifying "the Vlakplaas phenomenon" (19), that is, how details of Eugene de Kock's heinous crimes ("rural torture and murder") on behalf of the former Nationalist government add to the ambivalence of the trope of the farm:

The burials of Vlakplaas have become the buried – but now resurrected – memories, mentalities, crimes of a whole discredited political culture. But they also invite us to ponder more closely the possibility that the trope of the "boereplaas" has always been an ambivalent one, an ideality which always depended for its potency and charm on as much denial as affirmation, on as much suppression as transcendence.

(20)

In the farm crime novel, there is a deliberate exhumation of all that was denied and suppressed in the original *plaasroman*. The blood spilled on the land is re-examined as evidence of the past crimes of land appropriation, slavery and mass murder. As pointed out by van Wyk Smith, the symbol of the farm has undergone a

drastic transformation in recent decades, not least of all due to Coetzee's fraught and disturbing portrayal of the contested Salem farm in *Disgrace*. Now, ironically, the farm is a symbol of the white farmers' vulnerability, of on-going injustices and inequities, of the violence that is sometimes the consequence or impetus of transformation, but also, sometimes, of something hopeful and transcendent. In the farm crime novel some of the original "ideality" of the *plaasroman* tradition is retained in the symbol of the farm.

In Brynard's and Proctor's texts one can discern a recuperative project: the farm as symbol is revitalised and rearticulated as a "space of regeneration and harmony," but rather than serving the ideologies of colonialism or nationalism, it is now deployed to serve the project of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. The symbol of the farm thus functions in a complex way to evoke the past, to reveal the present in all its horror, and to imagine a future of justice and empathy. To this end, both novels create a crime which at first appears to be a politically motivated farm murder, but which in both cases turns out to be something very personal, or in the case of Proctor's novel, not a murder at all, but an act of profound compassion and selflessness. With the weight of this political history and literary tradition behind them, both authors use the trope of the farm to explore how the crimes of the past impinge on present relations. The ambivalence which van Wyk Smith iterates is apparent in the ironic overturning of expectations: the "murders" are not political, and the farms with their gory history are also sites of regeneration, change, healing and harmony (between humans and humans and between humans and animals). This is exemplified in the relationship between Freddie Swart, a young Afrikaans woman farmer, and Adam De Kok, her San farm manager, or between Ouma and her aptly-named dog, Suffering. This twenty-first century literary farm functions as a microcosm of post-apartheid society, a veritable hotbed of turbulent, passionate, and sometimes violent relationships. In *The Savage Hour*, Proctor paints a vivid and

dramatic portrait of Ouma, an Afrikaans matriarchal farmer and medical doctor, and her relationships with her domestic worker, Gogo, her farm labourers, Cheetah and Klein Samuel, her children and grandchild, a local policeman, Jannie, and most significantly with her dog, Suffering.

So, rather than having “disappeared together with an ideology of the past” (183), as C. N. van der Merwe has argued, the farm has been resurrected in these farm crime novels. The texts evoke the ambivalence of the farm trope by referring to the bloody criminal history of South African farms – the contestation over land ownership, slavery, exploitation of farm workers, and more recently, violent reprisal in the form of farm murders – whilst at the same time using the symbol to inscribe a new, hopeful, inclusive social order.

### ***Selfless Crimes in *The Savage Hour****

In *The Savage Hour* Proctor combines the *plaasroman* elements with the hallmark features of crime fiction to create a narrative about complex, interwoven relationships. The novel centres on an Afrikaans family, the De La Reys, and their relationship with the land and its people and animals. The childhood of Groot Samuel and Aletta is described in terms of the nostalgia and nationalist tradition found in the original *plaasroman*:

They had their language. They had the veld. And they had each other.

Every second Sunday they had Tannie Truida too, their embittered auntie, who filled their minds with stories of Boer women suffering in the British concentration camps. In the veld later, with clumps of smoking grass and ants as their army, they quelled the bastard English and freed their imprisoned kinfolk.

(103)

In this aspect of the novel, Proctor makes an overt gesture to the *plaasroman* tradition, but in other aspects the allusion is more subtle as the farm as trope serves more contemporary literary needs. The cast of characters is carefully rendered in order to explore race relations, familial relations, inter-generational relations, human-animal relationships, power dynamics, and such themes as friendship, empathy and aging. The crime fiction form allows for a compelling plot that has at its centre the death of the pivotal, charismatic character, Ouma. For most of the narrative, the reader, having been handed the red herring of a “farm murder,” is guessing: is it a murder, is it suicide or an accident? Jannie Claassens, a white, homosexual police detective, friend of Ouma and founder of the Elisabeth Eybers book club, is determined to solve the “crime” by carrying out investigations on the farm. It is through this use of the conventions of the crime novel, in combination with the *plaasroman* tradition, that Proctor is able to produce a novel of astonishing sensitivity and intricacy.

The plot of *The Savage Hour* has a covert design to do with the theme of empathy. Slowly it unfolds that Ouma has asked each adult character, first her children, then her closest friends on the farm, to help her die. The denouement begins when in a scene of great poignancy, Ouma asks Gogo to help her die and the two elderly women make a pact. Gogo agrees to help Ouma die, but only when Ouma can no longer remember the name of her child: “There it was. No one said anything about living or dying – but they had made a solemn vow and they both knew it” (322). In the overt crime fiction plot, at first Jannie’s deductions prove to be wrong and he fails miserably in his attempts to detect, but he does eventually succeed. He discovers that the crime is euthanasia and not murder, that the motive is not revenge or politics, but compassion. The real dilemma of the novel has to do with the notions of criminality and justice. What can Jannie do with the ‘truth’ once he has discovered it? The real criminals are shown to be the selfish, greedy characters who lack empathy and a deep appreciation of the land, who are cruel and disdainful to animals,

but who ultimately have to be recognised as products of their society. The criminals are not Gogo, nor Cheetah (the young HIV-positive pig handler from the Cape Flats who assists Gogo), nor Groot Samuel who is complicit in his mother's euthanasia. For Jannie, figuring out how to effect justice in post-apartheid South Africa with the burden of history weighing down on him relentlessly, is his main concern. Together with his boss at the Brits police station, Colonel Mokheti, he tries to work it out:

But every now and again, even though it doesn't get them anywhere, they muse on how far back the shadow of depravity goes. It is not the whole story, but both have come to believe, in their very different ways, that a cruel past makes a cruel present. And that lack of prospects for the poor keeps it that way.

(64)

With this knowledge of the impact of the past on the present, and with the lessons learned from Elisabeth Eybers's poetry and Ouma's kindness, Jannie determines to be "a seeker after the truth" (9), as astonishing and confounding as the "truth" may sometimes be.

The novel ends with Jannie inheriting Ouma's dog, Suffering, and Gogo part-inheriting the farm. For Jannie the lessons of Ouma's life and death are profound. Now a dog-owner and thus transformed, the novel suggests, he reads an Eybers poem that reminds him of Ouma: "Jannie used to wonder if Ouma was seeking redemption for her sins or perhaps those of her fathers. In this very singular moment he sees that it was the sins performed in the name of the soil, ancient and profane, which Ouma sought to redeem" (241). By having the various crimes described in the novel converge here in this "singular moment," Proctor links her farm crime novel to the *plaasroman* tradition of her forbears, which celebrated these very "sins performed in the name of the soil," expiated by Ouma's empathetic life and the self-sacrifice of her "killers."

For Gogo, the aging, black farm servant, the inheritance of the farm is life-changing too:

When she was a child, Gogo's father told her stories of her great-great-grandfather's land on the banks of the Lekwa river. The tales of his herds and his many wives seemed to her to be myth, so different were they from how they lived. The inhumanity of the 1913 Land Act, making it illegal for a black person to own land, was the most oft repeated of her father's stories. And it was always told with anger and sadness as it marked the beginning of the decline of her proud clan into servitude.

And now. Here she is, *wa bona*, a landowner. It is this fact that she braved the snakes to confirm. Just look how different it has made her, if only inside her own skin, in the way she views herself.

(239)

After a fifty-year relationship, which began with Ouma employing Gogo to work in her kitchen, the two women became friends, allies, confidantes, and eventually, Gogo is Ouma's most intimate source of succour, releasing her from the suffering and indignity of dementia, and thus freeing *herself* from servitude and landlessness. Even in the tenderest moments of pathos the past is alluded to, here with the reference to debt,<sup>4</sup> which has particular significance for the two women, and for farmer owners and farm labourers in general:

Gogo whispered, "You are paid in full, Ouma."

Ouma's eyes closed and she smiled.

The water rose and Ouma reached for Gogo's hand.

She turned to look at Gogo and said, "*Ke a leboha.*"

"Goodbye, *sisi*," whispered Gogo.

Ouma brushed her cheek with her hand and then she slipped, without fuss or comment, under the water.

(346)

For the two characters, Ouma and Gogo, the debt may be settled, but the novel does not generalise or sentimentalise with facile solutions for the entire nation. On the contrary, the notions of empathy and selflessness are problematised throughout and shown to be rare, even inadequate in the face of deeply-entrenched social crimes. But this is after all a crime novel, so some resolution is offered, and with it a glimmer of hope. Proctor has demonstrated how the spectres of the past, in a socio-political sense, as well as in terms of literary tradition, haunt the present. But this haunting, as Jacques Derrida has intimated,<sup>5</sup> is not altogether unhealthy or terrifying. The spectre's grasp can be attenuated and its energies diverted into a more wholesome future.

### **Intimate Crimes in *Weeping Waters***

In Karin Brynard's *Weeping Waters*, the references to farms, land dispossession and land claims, and farm murders, are much more explicit. The gruesome murder of Freddie Swarts, a thirty-three year old "eccentric artist from Johannesburg" (8), and her four-year-old adopted daughter, Klara, on the farm Freddie has inherited from her father, immediately results in the outraged belief that these are farm murders perpetrated by disgruntled farm workers or stock thieves. When Sara, Freddie's sister, raises the topic with Inspector Albertus Markus Beeslaar, the detective figure in this novel, he is quick to dismiss such hasty conclusions, pointing out the problematic nature of the term "farm murder": "Er ... yes. We actually don't use that term any more." [...] "What I mean, is," he scratched at his throat, "it remains an appalling crime. I don't for a second mean to say that it isn't. But it's no different from any other violent crime" (17–18). In this statement, Beeslaar makes clear his intention to investigate the murders from every possible angle, and not simply label them "farm murders," which would connote racially or politically motivated murders. As it turns out, he is right, and the murderer is a close friend of Freddie's, Nelmari Viljoen, with very personal and perverse motives for killing Freddie.

Also, Beeslaar is wise to the dangers of labelling the murders “farm murders.” As the narrative progresses it becomes clear how the murders are used as propaganda by right-wing elements who resort to vigilantism, claiming that the farm murders are a form of genocide. The “vulnerability and insecurity” of these farmers, once the heroes of the *plaasroman*, are captured by Brynard in her depiction of their racist, violent, and misguided response to Freddie’s murder. Van Wyk Smith has written that “farm murders are a spectacular manifestation of a far deeper and more perdurable conflict over the ownership and symbology of farm and land” (19), and although Freddie’s murder is not directly motivated by these deeper, historical conflicts, her relationship with the farm she owns and with its indigenous occupants, does in fact contribute to Nelmarie’s murderous jealousy. Moreover, her murder is the spark that reignites the old conflict between farm owner and farm labourer, as seen in this accusation from Buks Hanekom. Convinced that Adam De Kok is guilty of Freddie’s murder he exhorts Beeslaar:

“You’re allowing a very sly Bushman to pull the wool over your eyes – no offence, Sergeant,” he said, inclining his head towards Pyl, “but that’s what he is – one who kept the boss lady’s bed warm at night, while his sidekicks terrorised the farmers. He’s got big plans, that man. He wants to present our forefathers’ land on a platter to the political bosses in Pretoria. It’s in his direction you should be looking!”

(225)

The reference to “forefathers’ land” conjures up the image of the reified farm in the original *plaasroman* tradition. The murder victim, Freddie, disrupts the myth (or “metamyth,” as van Wyk Smith calls it) of the white-owned farm by repudiating the white farming community around Huilwater and calling into question the just ownership of the farm she has inherited.

Reminiscent of Lucy in *Disgrace*, Freddie is described as “different,” meaning she “wasn’t too bothered with the white people here” (59), and according to a family friend, Yvonne Lambrechts, she was more interested in the black people of the area, the poor, and the destitute. She helped at the feeding scheme, she fostered local children, and most significantly, she became embroiled in land claims: “And then at some stage she got involved with the local Griqua tribe who wanted to reclaim tribal land. The land, you know, that their forefathers apparently owned in the area. You can just imagine how that went down around here. People talked. There were rumours she wanted to sell Huilwater to the Griquas” (59).

Even the murderer, Nelmari, is forthcoming in revealing Freddie’s sympathies with the land claims of a local Griqua tribe: “Freddie wanted to paint the old chief of the local Griqua tribe. But then she got carried away. She became obsessed with the plight of the Griquas. Their landlessness, their poverty” (67). Eventually, Freddie’s interest in the people she shared the land with, or who had been dispossessed of the land she now owned, leads to her hiring Adam De Kok as foreman of Huilwater. Described by Sara as a “man of the veld through and through [...] San. Every bit of him” (71), Adam becomes Freddie’s friend and lover, while Freddie becomes fascinated with San folklore and mythology. Towards the end of her life Freddie symbolically depicts in her paintings the dispossession and oppression of the San and Griqua peoples, using disturbing and violent images. Ultimately, she chooses to bequeath the farm in her will to Adam, Outanna, an old servant at Huilwater, and Klara, thus returning the land to the San and Griqua peoples from whom it had been wrenched. This courageous act of confronting the spectre of the past leads, indirectly, to Freddie’s murder by Nelmari, who was insanely jealous of Adam and the role he played in Freddie’s life.

So, although the murders of Freddie and Klara appear to be “farm murders,” that is, a phenomenon associated with a history of racial hatred, and deep-seated resentment and injustice to do

with the disputed space of the farm, they are in fact the result of one crazed individual's thwarted personal desires and vengeful jealousy. Nelmari's intention to use the "farm murder" as a smokescreen fails, mainly due to Sara's fervent belief that her sister's murder was intimate, a crime of passion, somehow related to her empathetic artistic vision. Brynard demonstrates, through the character of Nelmari, that facile labels are dangerous and that history can sometimes be a red herring: "Nice little farm murder, hey, blame it on the blacks, no one will ever be the wiser" (336). When already irate farmers jump to the conclusion that this was a "farm murder," it causes chaos and violence in the community. The vigilante farmers become agitated and organise a march on the police station, during which a young boy, Kleinboel Pieterse, is accidentally shot by one of the farmers (333). The intense irony here is that the white farmers, blinded by a pastoral myth and prejudice, destroy their own future, embodied by the young Pieterse.

Although the novel centres on a crime without direct roots in the past, it nevertheless, through a complex narrative involving numerous characters from every sector of this remote, rural Northern Cape community, examines the past and its impact on the present. The poverty and desperation of farm workers in present-day South Africa are held up for scrutiny, as are the fears and prejudices of the white farmers. Further, a character such as Nelmari, a ruthless property developer, echoes the self-aggrandising land appropriation of the colonial era and the continuing dispossession that occurred during the apartheid regime. In Nelmari, and in characters such as Boet Pretorius and Buks Hannekom, are found traces of the white landowner of the *plaasroman* tradition. Only here, in the farm crime novel, these characters are the villains, not the heroes.

The novel offers layers of South African history in rich and poignant detail, intertwining the fates of Griquas, San, Coloured people, Afrikaans farmers, and black African labourers of Nguni origin. When considering the complexity of the volatile situation

that arises after Freddie's murder, Inspector Beeslaar is aware that the Afrikaans farmers in the area want to take action, falling back on old, apartheid-era commandos to patrol the district. They question and intimidate the Coloured workers, and the Coloured workers in turn blame the black African workers – “They say it's the, er, Bantus. And they're saying the Bantus are going to kill the lot of *them* too” (33). The ghost of apartheid is rampant here in this reinstatement of old hierarchies, but Beeslaar, although sympathetic to all parties, is adamant that past crimes and inequalities will not be used to scapegoat present crimes: “I hope you tell them this thing is not about race. It's crime. Plain and simple. These kinds of attackers are nervous, inexperienced robbers. And if they feel threatened, they kill – doesn't matter who comes along – and often it's a labourer. But whatever the case, it's not a question of race” (33).

Beeslaar is of course partially correct. The murder of Freddie by Nelmari is not a direct result of racism, but Freddie's relationship with a black man, Adam, referred to as “the mantis man” (336) by Nelmari, was part of the motivation. Besides this personally-motivated murder, there are numerous other social crimes represented in the novel, which have their roots in the past, not least of all the crime of near-genocide committed against the San people of the area:

like the faint traces of Bushmen on the farm. Just a hint that remained. An arrow-tip in the sandy soil, tiny fragments of ostrich-shell beads. Nobody to weep for the San. Generations of them, hunted down like animals for hundreds of years – by white and black alike. Only the land endured, impassive, irrespective of whose blood flowed over it. The rocks and sand and the lingering red sunsets remained unchanging. Though the original people of the veld were gone forever.

For Sara, through whom this passage is focalised, the land is key. It is the common factor that endures, impervious to the human suffering which occurs on it, and virtually unchanged by the crimes it bears witness to. Sara has been estranged from the land, and from her family, for a number of years. Freddie's murder brings her back to Huilwater, where she re-learns to see the land in this way. This sub-narrative of her return and reconnection with Huilwater harks back to the nostalgia and utopian pastoralism of the *plaasroman* tradition. But there is more to this story of "return to the land," to borrow Coetzee's words ("Farm Novel" 11). Another lesson for Sara is to reconcile with her history and her heritage by taking responsibility for an "other." In this case, the "other" is a dog, simply and pointedly called Hond. Recalling the initial descriptions of the murder scene at Huilwater, Hond, and in particular his survival, come to take on symbolic value: "The blood was everywhere: walls, floor, bed. The woman's long summer dress, light blue, was stained black. And outside, the front stoep too was a mess, with three sheepdogs and a mongrel lying in pools of blood" (10).

From the outset of the novel, as this scene attests, animals too are victims of heinous violence. In this novel, as in *Disgrace*, the examination of the violence of humans towards one another is intertwined with the violence of humans towards animals, and the slaughter of Freddie's dogs recalls the shooting of Lucy's dogs in their kennels. Later, when Outanna is murdered the dog that had been tied up outside her sister's house is also killed:

Then he saw the origin of the stench: blood seeping from under the toilet door.

Warily, he approached. The door was slightly ajar. [...] What he saw made him reel back, heaving.

It was the dog. Its feet had been bound with wire and its throat slit. The poor animal must have lain there bleeding like a slaughtered sheep.

[...] What kind of perverted fuck did something like that? The kind of animal who would burn a vulnerable old woman alive?

(148)

What Beeslaar witnesses here is reminiscent of the descriptions of Freddie, who also had her throat slit. Although the criminals are different and are acting out of very different motives, they murder the dogs in a similarly gory and senseless manner, and are, in fact, conspirators, who, together with a neighbouring farmer, Boet Pretorius, run a stock theft syndicate. Just as in *The Savage Hour*, the most inhumane and callous characters are shown to commit extreme acts of cruelty towards animals. Another incident of animal cruelty is depicted when a pet baboon, Debora, is murdered and strung up by farmers in an attempt to intimidate Adam De Kok (222). In the farm crime novel animals are not, however, depicted solely as the victims of violent crimes, but are, as Wendy Woodward has argued of the dogs in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* and in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, represented as subjects capable of complex interactions with human beings (90).

### ***Medemenslikheid* and the Figure of the Dog**

Bearing in mind that the farm crime novel has, primarily, a human focus, attempts to present the “the nonhuman perspective” are peripheral, and there is no discernible intention to “represent animal consciousness or behaviour accurately” (Armbruster n.p.). It is worth describing, rather, the cultural or social significance of dogs in these narratives. As Woodward has observed, it is possible, by locating dogs “culturally and historically” in a novel, to “pose ontological questions about being human in relation to other animals” (90). The contention here is that the relationship between dogs and humans is used indirectly, symbolically, and perhaps idealistically, to reveal a certain lack in human relations. This lack, if taken to be a lack of empathy, arguably manifests most extremely in the violent crimes that people commit against

one another. Karla Armbruster notes that in narratives which feature dogs, “a trace of a desire to know and better understand the real otherness of animals, to uncentre from our human perspective and – in whatever limited way we can – open ourselves to the nonhuman” is evident (n.p.). She immediately qualifies this statement by adding: “this desire is sometimes almost completely overshadowed by or absorbed back into the human tendency to gaze – whether lovingly or critically – at our own reflection when we look at other animals” (n.p.). There are examples of literary representations of dogs in the South African *plaasroman* tradition which are mostly anthropocentric or which may even be described as examples of “the grossest anthropomorphism, lapsing into worn-out [...] stereotypes” (n.p.). Perhaps the best-known example is in *The Story of an African Farm*, where the dog Doss is anthropomorphised in order, mainly, to express the sensitivity and innermost feelings of the characters Waldo and Lyndall. But what Olive Schreiner does show is that certain characters (the ‘good’ characters) are capable of caring relationships with non-human animals, and her characterisation of Doss is arguably not intended to confirm “a sense of humanity’s ultimate superiority over other creatures” (Armbruster n.p.).

In the farm crime novel, dogs are often shown to be superior to humans in their intelligence and sensitivity. Armbruster’s observations quoted above are apposite to the figure of the dog in farm crime novels. The trace of desire to know, understand, have better relations with dogs is present in these novels, even while the best and the worst of human nature is the main focus. The lesson, in general, is that we should be more empathetic, and take from those rare moments of cross-species empathy the valuable insight that human-human empathy is also possible. Animal rights literary critics would object to the use of animals mainly as symbols or as projections of human concerns because these representations erase animal lives, thus functioning as yet another way in which humans exploit other animals for their self-serving

purposes (Shapiro and Copeland 345). However anthropomorphic the figure of the dog is in the farm crime novel, and however anthropocentric the themes are ultimately, both texts go to some lengths to contrast the empathetic relationships between humans and animals with the sometimes brutal and callous relations between humans and humans.

Counter to the thread of animal cruelty and animal killings found in both novels, there are profound relationships between humans and animals portrayed in painstaking detail. The relationship between Sara and Hond has already been mentioned. In *The Savage Hour*, the most moving relationship is between Ouma and Suffering. There is also the relationship between Klein Samuel and Gundwane, a large Nguni bull; between Cheetah and the pigs she cares for; between Delilah, Ouma's grand-daughter, and the dog, Important, that she rescues from the dog shelter; and then the mutually redemptive relationship that develops between Jannie and Suffering, after he inherits the dog.

*The Savage Hour* opens with the declaration of Ouma's death and then a description of the "black-backed jackal on the hill behind the farmhouse" (3) who is aware that something is amiss:

It isn't the routine lamentation that attends feeding time at the pig farm next door that alerts him to things amiss. Nor the feeble barking from one of the six panting dogs laid out like seals on the hot red sand.

It is the much quieter rattle coming from underneath the gracious, slowly fading acacia trees. The mysterious weight in the sound makes him whimper.

(3)

The jackal is aware of various animal sounds on the farm but the sound that affects him the most is emanating from a large Nguni bull called Gundwane that Klein Samuel is leading to the dam for a drink of water (4). The novel ends with a description of the same jackal, who is watching Cheetah from his vantage point above the

farm while he hunts. He goes about his business as the humans down below attempt to recreate their lives after the pain and tragedy caused by the deaths of Ouma, Klein Samuel and Dumisane. This framing of the narrative, and the characterisation of the jackal as both sensitive to the activities on the farm but also elevated and detached from them, suggest that Proctor is keen to present a non-human perspective, however limited this may be, with perhaps the intention of understanding both animal consciousness and the mysteries of human relations.

There are other incidents and scenes to substantiate this contention. For example, Groot Samuel attempts to rescue a baby baboon when his wife, Ilse, negligently lets out a pack of five farm dogs, which attack the baboon. The scene is described with some pathos:

There, on its back with eyes as big as pools and a gash in its side, lies a small baby baboon.

Groot Samuel kneels down.

He pulls off his raincoat. The pyjama top underneath it is at least partially dry and still warm from his body. He wraps it around the small body and then draws it into his chest. It is too wounded to protest.

(75)

The scene ends five pages later when Groot Samuel buries the baboon's body, and is shown to grieve for yet another death, and indirectly for his childless and loveless marriage. Another character who seeks solace in animals is Cheetah, the pig-handler, "named by her father because she looked just like a wild cat. With eyes like bullets and of course those tear trails down her cheeks" (125–26). Through her empathy with the pigs, Proctor is able to emphasise with Cheetah's isolation due to her HIV-positive status, and also her compassion: "Cheetah has always said that pigs are clever. Klein Samuel laughs when she says it but she knows that there isn't much they can't sense. She has a special feeling for the sow in the second pen. She is the oldest and most

bountiful. Cheetah sometimes comes to sit with her in the pen, just to be there” (94). In these examples, the human-animal relations illuminate the pathos and the suffering of the human lives, but they also show the human characters’ capacity for compassion and tenderness.

By far the most moving and most significant human-animal relation in the novel exists between Ouma and her dog, Suffering. We are first introduced to Suffering through the following description: “When the sun reaches its apogee the hat is broad enough to cast shade on both the old woman and the skinny yellow dog who lies beside her. Her dog, Suffering. Her shadow” (7). The physical and emotional bond between human and animal is captured here, as is the intimation of death, with Suffering being described as a “shadow.” This relationship, we soon learn, is the most profound and consoling one that Ouma experiences during her last days. In fact, the bond between woman and dog is so strong that it elicits envy in other characters:

There was no other name for the skinny yellow bag of bones that showed up one day at Ouma’s surgery with his tail between his legs and open sores on his back. *Suffering*.

Groot Samuel and Gogo were both secretly envious of the intense feeling that flowed between Ouma and her canine shadow.

(24)

This “intense feeling” between Ouma and Suffering later acts as a clue to unravelling the mystery of Ouma’s death. At Ouma’s funeral Jannie realises that Suffering has disappeared and that if he had been present when Ouma drowned, he would have tried to rescue her: “He knows that had Suffering been there on that fateful morning, as he always was, he would have barked until someone came to Ouma’s rescue. He would have woken them from their slumber, he would have bared his teeth and howled until they answered his call” (121). This revelation convinces Jannie that Ouma did not slip and that her drowning was not

accidental. Thus the figure of the dog, already established thematically, comes to play a pivotal role in the murder mystery plot. For Jannie, the absence of the dog is proof of murder. Just as Kerneels's presence at the scene of the murder of Desiree Williams in Michiel Heyns's crime novel, *Lost Ground* (2011), suggests that Kerneels's owner is the murderer, and the fact that the murder victim's dog, Cedric, did not bark indicates that the murderer was a regular visitor to the Williams home, the absence of Suffering at the scene of the crime tells the detective that Ouma's death was premeditated. The murderer had to get rid of her "shadow" before committing the deed. As it turns out, Ouma was not murdered but euthanised and Suffering was in fact abducted and taken to an animal shelter by Ilse in an act of revenge because she felt rejected by Ouma, her mother-in-law. In a suspenseful scene of detection and chase, Jannie and Delilah rescue Suffering seconds before he is due to be euthanised at the animal shelter, thus establishing Jannie and Delilah as the second-tier heroes of the novel. Crucially, Jannie and Delilah share Ouma's capacity for empathy for animals. Delilah remembers a scene not long before Ouma's death: she sees Ouma in bed with Suffering lying beside her:

"You don't care, do you, Suffering?" *Thump, thump*. "That I am stupid."

There was silence and then, "A person without words. As stupid as a piece of wood, without stories even, without Elisabeth and her poems." Then she hears Ouma begin to cry, hard, dry gasps.

Delilah hurried to her door and, once again, what she saw made her stop.

Suffering was licking away the salty tears that flowed down Ouma's cheeks, dutifully and without sentiment. Delilah could see her grandmother had no need of human solace.

(139)

This scene establishes Proctor's project to show that empathy between humans and animals is possible, albeit that humans sometimes choose to interpret the existence of this bond in ways that are self-serving. What Delilah witnesses is Ouma's lack of inhibitions in the company of Suffering. With Suffering she expresses what she most fears and with this comes an outpouring of grief and self-pity. The dog responds by licking Ouma's tears, which may be an expression of sympathy or simply the animal's appetite for the taste of salt. Proctor deliberately leaves the interpretation of this scene up to the reader when she describes Suffering's actions as being performed "dutifully and without sentiment." But the effect these actions have on Ouma is unequivocal – at this moment, we are told, she "had no need of human solace," and this is testimony to both Suffering's (projected) sympathy for Ouma<sup>6</sup> and Ouma's capacity to receive consolation from a dog.

Ouma is shown to be a caring, dutiful person who helps humans and animals alike in her capacity as farm doctor:

Delilah has seen people show up at Ouma's surgery with injured dogs lying across the back seat of their cars. The old lady never turned them away. The nearest vet was over an hour away. Mostly they came with puffadder bites or biliary.

She lingered over their care. And if, rarely, she suspected the owner was responsible for the injury she offered to buy the dog there and then. That is why the dog population at the farm had been known to swell to over ten at one or other time.

Delilah can still hear her say, "*Bokkie*, remember the way we treat our animals is a true measure of our *peopleness*." She said it like she was speaking in Afrikaans, *ons medemenslikheid*, our humanity.

(140)

The most important lesson imparted by Ouma, verbally and in the example of her life, to Delilah, Gogo, Jannie, Groot Samuel and others, is that paradoxically, humanity and empathy are gauged by

how humans treat non-human animals. Proctor does not take this idea much further, not to the degree that Coetzee does in *Disgrace* or *The Lives of Animals*, but she does, as Armbruster notes of such literary representations, attempt to offer the animal perspective or a portrayal of a human-animal bond, in order to simultaneously comment favourably on the human capacity for empathy whilst criticising the lack of empathy so often evident in human behaviour.

Eventually, Ouma's concept of *medemenslikheid* extends to the lives of others.

Gogo greets Suffering warmly on his return from the shelter and she significantly names the new dog Important (157). Jannie inherits Suffering and his loneliness is assuaged by the presence of the dog:

In the cold early hours, the small yellow dog crawls into Jannie's bed for warmth.

Jannie hesitates, then curls his drowsy body around Suffering's skin and bones. It occurs to him that he has never woken to a lover's warmth beside him. He has always stolen his intimacies [...].

Why he should be thinking such thoughts he doesn't know but they make his insides ache. He savours the small, warm body next his and waits for sleep to take him to a kinder world.

(170)

It is not that the suffering of the world is alleviated by instances of empathy, but that moments of empathy make the suffering bearable. Almost all the main characters show signs of empathy and compassion toward one another and toward animals: Gogo, Ouma, Cheetah, Klein Samuel, Groot Samuel, Delilah, and Jannie. In this novel, when a character is cruel or negligent towards animals, it is anomalous and indicative of a deep, pervasive lack, as is the case with Ilse, who is shown to be racist and perverse in her treatment of both her husband and her mother-in-law. Ouma is

as an exemplary character who makes it her mission to connect with people and animals:

“We must go out there,” she said, and she waved her hand into the blackness, “and find the most *vul-ner-a-ble* person” – she said the word like each syllable lived separately and was only revelatory when brought together – “and we must tell them ...”

He didn’t want to hear any more, but her eyes held him there.

“... that they are not alone.”

(79)

When she is in need of succour due to her dementia, she finds, after some seeking and some suffering, that she is not alone. Gogo and Cheetah gently and lovingly help her die. Their acts of *medemenslikheid* are testimony to Ouma’s extraordinary humanity, depicted mainly through the figure of the dog, Suffering, and her deep bond with him.

In *Weeping Waters*, Brynard describes Yvonne Lambrecht’s loving relationship with her dogs, Adam De Kok’s sensitivity to his birds of prey, and the growing intimacy between Sara and Hond. Hond is described as “panting on the back seat of the car. The scrawny mutt was hardly a guard dog, but he did have heart. Already, he followed her everywhere, his crooked tail wagging every time she looked at him” (251). Being the only surviving dog on the farm after the murders, Hond takes on particular significance because of his capacity to endure and escape the murderous intent of criminals such as Nelhari and Vuyo. As in the case of Suffering, Hond is a figure of hope, gesturing to the empathy and kindness possible in human beings, when confronted with the simple yet deep relations offered by animals. Against the background of narratives about personal and social crimes, undoubtedly manifestations of the most abhorrent aspects of human nature, the figure of the dog stands out as somehow transcendent. With such relations possible between humans and

animals, the prospect of more empathetic and ethical relations between humans and humans is conveyed.

\* \* \*

While attempting to make sense of the crimes that currently beleaguer South Africa, crime fiction reaches back in time to uncover the root causes of the country's state of disorder. The various genres of crime fiction, whether it be a crime thriller, a literary detective novel, a postmodernist anti-detective novel or a farm crime novel, are especially successful at uncovering this relationship between past and present crimes. The doyen of South African crime fiction, Deon Meyer, writes crime thrillers which provide detailed historical background for his readers, and his detective figures labour for justice under the yoke of the past, aiming to be reborn in a new, shaky South Africa which still bears the scars of the past. In a novel such as *Coldsleep Lullaby*, Andrew Brown deliberately and effectively forces the reader to confront the relationship between social relations in present day Stellenbosch and the power dynamics of master and slave in colonial Stellenbosch.

Similarly, in the farm crime novel, a new perspective on so-called farm murders in post-apartheid South Africa is offered. Drawing on and extending the *plaasroman* tradition in South Africa, these novels subvert the media hype and anxiety surrounding "farm murders" and the related issues of land ownership and historical dispute. The extremely complex and messy process of land redistribution is shown to be of primary concern, but not necessarily the motive for present crimes. Often the detectives fail in the detection process leading to further tragedy and mayhem, but at least the spectres of the past are confronted.

In another sense also the *plaasroman* tradition is rehabilitated by the farm crime novel through the inclusion of the figure of the dog. Armbruster would see this inclusion as an imagining of:

a posthuman world, in which voices come from all sorts of beings (including not just dogs but atoms), the human voice is demoted from the humanist position of authority and control to one among many, and the focus is figuring out how our (albeit temporary) human bodies, minds, and lives interact with those of other beings and holding ourselves accountable for the consequences of those interactions.

(n.p.)

The voices of all sorts of beings fill these novels, making it possible to question how humans interact with animals and other humans. The effect is that human accountability is foregrounded in these relations, especially in the complex criminal ones. While the farm crime novel may not “solve” South Africa’s crimes, through it a literary tradition is extended and amplified, and a valuable form of social analysis is offered.

#### NOTES

1. See South African crime fiction special issues of *Current Writing* (ed. Michael Chapman) and *Scrutiny2* (ed. Deirdre Byrne).

2. Another obvious example is Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, but as this text has been so exhaustively analysed and studied, it will be referred to only tangentially in this article.

3. *Disgrace* also intertwines human-human relations and human-animal relations in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, posing grave ethical and moral questions about the criminal ways in which humans treat each other and other non-human animals.

4. This too is a notion found in *Disgrace*, where Lucy decides that becoming the mistress of Petrus and handing over the farm and all her possessions to him is the debt she owes for the crimes of apartheid. Significantly, both Lurie and Lucy view Lucy’s state after paying this ‘debt’ as that of a dog (205). For more on the figure of the dog in *Disgrace* see: Cornwell, “An Image of Animals: Speciesism in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Gal, “A Note on the Use of Animals for Remapping Victimhood in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Graham, “‘Yes, I am giving him up’: Sacrificial Responsibility and Likeness with Dogs in J. M. Coetzee’s Recent Fiction”; Green, “‘A Man’s Best Friend Is His Dog’: Treatments of the Dog in *Jane Eyre*, Kate Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Jeanette Winterson’s ‘The 24 Hour Dog’.”

5. In general, Derrida's theorisation of spectrality, or what he calls "hauntology," proves useful for the investigation of how South African crime fiction explores the relationship between crimes in post-apartheid South Africa, and crimes of the colonial and apartheid eras.

6. In another instance of projected human behaviour, Suffering wails when he returns to the farm to find that Ouma is nowhere to be found and thus "gives voice to the canine and human mourning alike" (157–58).

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