

Background to **Mixed Blood**

by Roger Smith

One day in June 1976, when I was sixteen, I was riding on a bus in downtown Johannesburg, watching as a few thousand black school kids my age smashed store windows and torched cars. Watching as a lot of them got taken down by white cops with pump-action shot guns. This was day one of the youth uprising that spread out of Soweto and started a two-decade-long struggle that finally killed apartheid. These kids, like me, are a lot older now. Wiser, less idealistic.

Some of them still have old scores to settle, like Disaster Zondi, the Zulu detective in **Mixed Blood**.

When I was seventeen I was drafted into South Africa's white army busy fighting a meaningless bush war against ragged bands of black men with guns, some of them those kids from Soweto. The army called them communists and they called themselves freedom fighters. One Sunday morning I saw thirty of them dead, dumped off the back of a truck, the tailgate dark with blood. They lay on the sand and a group of white men in black suits – some still carrying bibles from the church they had just been praying in – walked among their bodies like vultures. The men had blunt haircuts and brutal accents and believed that whatever they did, they did in the name of their god. I saw these men often through the next decades; on the streets; in bars; in cop cars; on TV, standing over corpses – always fuelled by the belief that what they were doing was just and good.

Men like Rudi “Gatsby” Barnard, the psychopathic cop in **Mixed Blood**.

Tired of Johannesburg and its hard edges and grit, I moved down to Cape Town, seduced by the mountain and the ocean. People say Cape Town looks like the

south of France, or California, just more beautiful. More than geography separates picture-postcard Cape Town from the windswept badlands of the Cape Flats, a sprawling ghetto home to millions of people of mixed race. The rape and murder count on the Flats is the highest in the world and every day children are violated and slaughtered and nobody seems to pay much attention. The media prefers to discuss who is wearing what and eating where and dating whom, back on the beautiful side of town.

A few years ago I fell in love with a woman who grew up out on the Flats and the true stories she told me and the world she introduced me to changed my view of Cape Town forever.

The first person I met in her family was her brother. I went with her to prison to visit him. He was in his thirties and, since the age of fourteen, had spent a total of two years out of jail. We took his child with us: a boy of five. The prisoner, in his orange jumpsuit – gang tattoos carved into his skin – scared the boy. He scared me too, with his dead eyes and shaking hands. And I think we scared him, because we were part of the world outside. A world where he was powerless. He knew if he ever went out there again he wouldn't stand a chance, would end up where he always ended up: back in prison.

Part of that man found his way into Benny Mongrel, **Mixed Blood's** dog-loving, ex-con night watchman.

So, I had these people – all products of South African violence – running around in my head, looking for a home.

Last year I saw a TV news report about a good-looking American couple who lived in a smart part of Cape Town, just minutes away from my apartment. They ran a restaurant and everybody said how friendly and nice they were. But they'd robbed a

couple of banks in the US and were hiding out in my city. After they were captured they were sent back home to do serious prison time.

This story made me think: “what if ?”

What if a man with a past, a man on the run – Jack Burn, **Mixed Blood’s** conflicted hero – brings his family to Cape Town, seduced by those images of mountains and beaches and freedom? What if they are building new lives for themselves when they are confronted by a random act of violence – a collision between the Cape Flats and privileged Cape Town – that hooks them into the world of Rudi “Gatsby” Barnard and Benny Mongrel and Disaster Zondi?

Those “what ifs” became **Mixed Blood.**