

# Burn while reading

Roger Smith's pen unveils a part of Cape Town we all love to ignore — a city of crime, corruption and bubbling racial tension, writes Andrew Donaldson

**T**HE Cape Town in which Roger Smith's debut crime thriller, *Mixed Blood*, unfolds, is not exactly the halcyon, sun-dazed cosmopolis of the travel brochures. In fact, it's Gomerah, a corrupt and violent city at such odds with the cherished cliché of a natural paradise and a playground for the beautiful, that it seems, well, like a far-off place in a distant, troubled land — and, we'd like to believe, certainly not the Cape Town in which Roger Smith lives.

It is a terrific morning. The late summer sunlight fills his Mouille Point flat and, outside his balcony across Beach Road, women stroll with their dogs in a turquoise haze. At the nearby pavement café, men stare out at a flat ocean from behind designer sunglasses, sip at their espressos and make like this is the Mediterranean. Smith, the newest member of the growing band of Cape Town crime writers, is pondering a question as to why the city should have thrown up so many of the country's thriller writers.

"I don't really have an answer to that," he says. "But the thing is, you'd feel logically that Joburg would have produced more crime writers than Cape Town. But it is interesting that it is Cape Town. I suspect there's a reason for it. With Joburg, everything is fairly open, whereas in Cape Town . . .

"Well, there's been this response . . . almost as if I'd walked up to the prettiest girl at the party and slapped her. People were like, 'How can you talk about Cape Town like that?'

"And I realised there's this interesting dichotomy — you can say whatever you like about Joburg. You can. Joburg's fair game. You can say Joburg's ugly, polluted, noisy, crime-riddled, greedy and, if I'd written a book about Joburg in those terms, everyone would have said, 'Hey, no fine!'

"But when you talk about Cape Town, then it's something else that happens, and I think it has something to do with the fact that it is so beautiful, that there's this illusion.

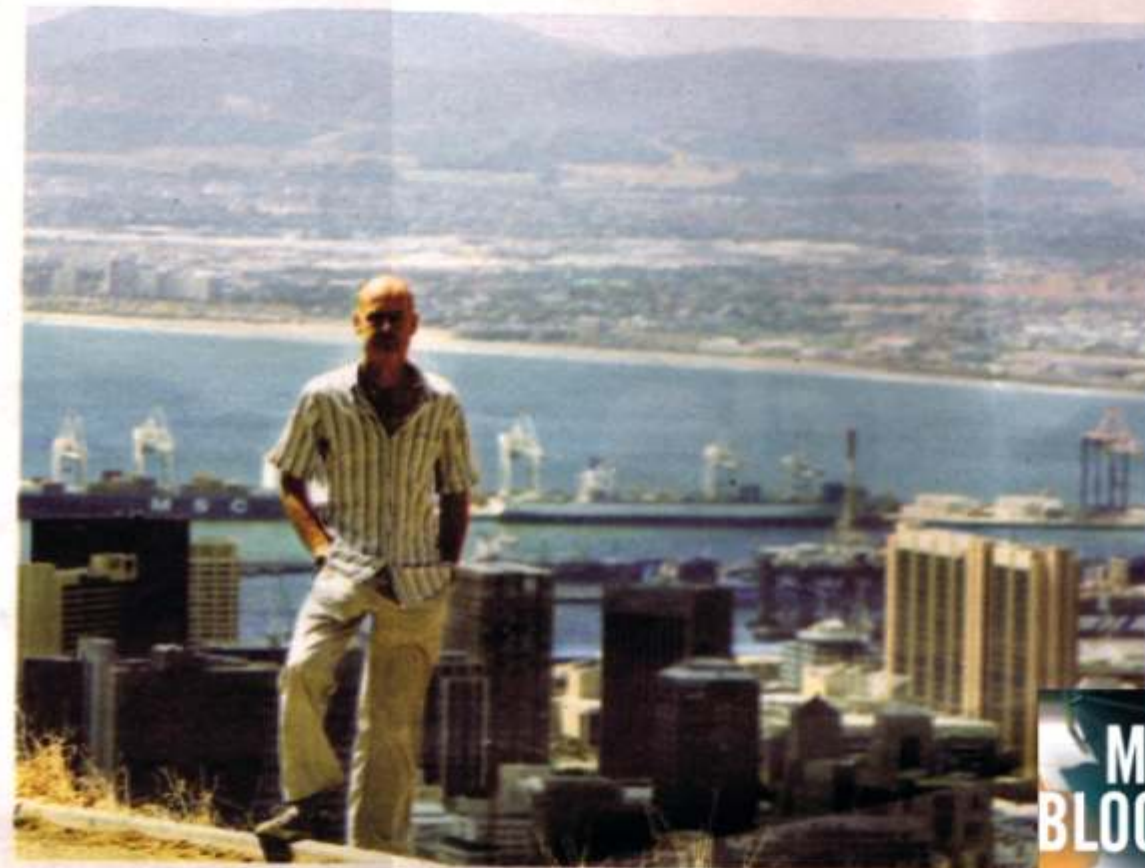
"I know. I'm from Joburg. I came down here in the late '90s, settled here. For about a year or so I lived in this fantastic bubble. I knew of course — because one knows — that I chose not to explore beyond my bubble. I was at the beach, I was wafting around Camps Bay and having this idyllic existence, then . . ."

Well, then he met his partner, who was raised on the Cape Flats, and she changed his vision of the city. Cape Town, he says, went "widescreen". Smith works in film as a screenwriter, director and producer, so the term seems appropriate.

"Cape Town," he continues, "is fascinating that way.

"On the one hand, there's this

**As villains go, he is addicted to cruelty, junk food and Jesus**



**JOIN THE CLUB:** Smith is the latest addition to Cape Town's crime writers

little Europeanised bubble and then you have all that other stuff; the sprawl of the Flats, all of the stuff that goes on there, which is by and large successfully ignored . . .

"In small ways, I've tried to tell that story."

Smith's novel is a frenetic roller-coaster of noirish desperation. Fast and furious, full of blood and vengeance, it tells the story of Californian fugitive Jack Burn, a former US Marine, who has fled to Cape Town with \$3-million following a bank heist in the US in which a cop was shot dead.

Burn has settled into an elite neighbourhood on the slopes of Signal Hill and is trying to build a new life with his pregnant wife and young son.

One night, in a random act of violence, two members of the Americans, one of the most notorious of the Cape Flats gangs, break into Burns's home and attack him and his family. The break-in and what

follows is witnessed by Benny, a security guard at a nearby construction site. The guard, a former convict, also happens to be a member of the Mongrels — the sworn gangland rivals of the Americans.

These events — not to mention those stolen millions — also attract the attention of Rudi Barnard, a corrupt and murderous cop who claims to be deeply religious, and Disaster Zondi, a Zulu detective who jets into town from Joburg to settle an old "pre-apartheid" score with Barnard.

Smith says he wanted a character that "spoke a little of my experiences" growing up in apartheid South Africa, and that character is Barnard. As villains go, he is a startlingly loathsome creation. Addicted in equal parts to cruelty, junk food and Jesus, he lumbers through the book, an obese and brutal behemoth with personal hygiene problems.

"It was a pleasure to write him," Smith laughs. "I was able to exorcise a whole bunch of stuff. Barnard was not a person, but a state of

mind, a sensibility. That thing of not being able to do anything on a Sunday, of growing up in this country where Calvinism dictated that you could do buggar-all on a Sunday. You heard church bells, lawnmowers sometimes, and that was that. You couldn't go to a movie, you couldn't play sport, you couldn't do anything because God said, 'No.'

"When we think back on apartheid, we think of all the real horrors of it, but it's also that stuff, that suffocation, that feeling of being oppressed by this ideology that you could never escape from. So it was fantastic to write Barnard, this disgusting character who is also completely God be\*f\*k. It was fun."

The Zulu detective Zondi is, of course, a clear doffing of the cap to James McClure's *Kramer and Zondi* series of police procedurals. Written in the '70s, these novels, set in the fictional KwaZulu-Natal of Trekkersberg, formed a subtle yet damning critique of apartheid.

SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

Tromp Kramer, an outwardly conventional white cop adopts the prejudices expected of him — yet relies heavily on the detective skills of his black constable, Mickey Zondi, when it comes to solving murders. McClure's novels, sadly, were never that popular in South Africa.

"During the '80s, and even into the '90s, it would have been considered frivolous if you'd written about crime," Smith says. "Somehow writers in South Africa were meant to tackle apartheid and, if you wrote about anything outside that, you were largely setting yourself up to be dismissed."

He adds that, having grown up reading the novels of John D McDonald, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, among others, the thought of turning to crime writing as well had "always been there", but "it just took me a long time to sit down and actually do it".

As it happened, the opportunity to sit down and do that writing came about when, in the space of a week in 2007, a number of film projects fell through.

"All my work evaporated," Smith says. "A number of my projects, which pretty much would have kept me busy for the year, all went away for different reasons.

"I sat down and thought, 'What do I do? Do I become depressed and desperate? Or do I see this as an opportunity?' It was the weirdest thing. I kind of sat down and this book 'appeared'."

Weirder still, once finished, he sent off about 300 e-mails to literary agents in the US. Most ignored him. Some wrote back, requesting to see a chapter. One of those wrote back again, and demanded to see the rest of it. And she sold it to publishers in New York. It all happened, as Smith says, "offshore".

But it gets better. The film rights have been optioned. Smith says Samuel L Jackson has read the book and wants to play Zondi. "He loves the book," he says, "and he's committed and attached to the project."

We can hold thumbs and — oh dear — crime may just be paying here.

● *Mixed Blood* is published by Henry Holt, R185

