

Crime Beat: Roger Smith flat out

by Mike Nicol on Sep 20th, 2010



Last year with Mixed Blood Roger Smith brought the noir crime novel to our cosy shores. It was a slap in the face for many, and certainly wrong-footed Kadar Asmal who'd come in from the cold to interview him at the Book Lounge launch. Clearly it wasn't Kadar's idea of a crime novel at all. But elsewhere in the world, particularly Germany,



Smith was tapping into the long dark night of many souls. And now he's back with another Cape Flats scorcher called Wake Up Dead that no less a crime thriller fundi than Kate Turkington reckons is the best yet out of our nascent genre. Roger trails a long body count, he's a man of many guns and a mean dude with an Okapi knife, so stand back, he's noirish:

Crime Beat: You have had considerable success with both **Mixed Blood** and **Wake Up Dead** in the US and Germany. In fact you have received extensive critical attention, you must have been pleased with this and the intelligent way the books have been received?



Roger Smith: I've been very fortunate. Both books have received great reviews in the US, Germany, and now the UK. **Mixed Blood** is in development as a feature film in the US and won the Deutscher Krimi Preis (German Crime Prize) for 2009. **Wake Up Dead** was number one on the KrimiWelt list – 19 German, Swiss and Austrian crime reviewers – earlier this year, and when I was in Germany for the launch of the translation, **Blutiges Erwachen**, the response was phenomenal. My books will also be published in Italy, France and Japan.

Crime Beat: You have been compared to Dennis Lehane, George Pelecanos, Elmore Leonard, Mickey Spillane, and Donald Westlake which is such a broad sweep of the genre as to render these comparison's silly. Comparisons are both flattering and tedious. Do you just brush them off as reviewer's laziness, or do you trace back roots to some or all of these writers?

Roger Smith: Comparisons are odious, but who the hell can resist these — with the possible exception of Mickey Spillane! Of course I'm flattered, but I understand that comparisons are often merely a way of thumbnailing a book, ala Hollywood: the Hansie meets Deep Throat kind of thing.

But Leonard is a great influence: the ensemble cast, the suspense rather than mystery approach, the dark humour. And the late Westlake's Stark alter-ego remains a reminder that there's an alternative to the Scandinavian snooze-fests that weigh down the bookshelves. James Ellroy's name comes up quite often too. Body count, I guess.

Crime Beat: Let's get to the nitty-gritty: *Wake Up Dead*. It's come hard on the heels of *Mixed Blood*, does this mean you are joining the novel-a-year workaholics?

Roger Smith: Ja. Third book, *Dust Devils*, is done and sold. Busy with number four now. Hell, I don't have a day job anymore, so I have no excuse not to write.

Crime Beat: That's some achievement. Not many local novelists fall into this category. Well done, did you expect it to happen at all?.

Roger Smith: Thanks. No, all this has come as a real shock, albeit a very pleasant one. I am a very lucky man.

Crime Beat: All the elements of *Mixed Blood* are to be found again in *Wake Up Dead*: the tight fast plot, the clipped dialogue, the cast of dangerous, explosive characters who exist in a drug heightened toxic world. It is almost a hermetically sealed world; once you're in, there are not many ways out. Death of course is one. Obviously this is a world you want and the world you believe inherent to the crime novel.

Roger Smith: Well, I don't know if it's a world I *want*, but it is the world we live in, so I'm going to write about it. I've said this to you before, but I admire crime fiction that reflects the world in which it is set. Somehow, I don't see contemporary South Africa as the setting for capers and cozies, but maybe that's just me . . .

Crime Beat: Whoops, a slip there, I meant the fictional world you want. As for the capers and cozies, no I don't think it's just you, that seems to be the general consensus here. In your interview with 702's Kate Turkington you said you believed a SA crime writer had a dual responsibility: (1) to write a page-turner, and (2) not to trivialise or minimise the impact of crime on our society. Which kind of brings us to crime fiction as a social novel which is not too many removes from a political novel. Do you see crime fiction in general and yours in particular delivering political commentary?

Roger Smith: Not political commentary, but social commentary, for sure. I'm not up on a pulpit here, but, as I said in that interview with Kate, I feel strongly that we local crimeheads need to tell good stories and let the realities of our environment inform those stories. We don't live in Sweden where more people are murdered on the pages of crime novels than in the streets of Stockholm or wherever. I think it is disingenuous, not to mention in poor taste, to say that South African crime fiction is purely entertainment.

Crime Beat: Your city is also a closely imagined one, not only in detail, but in its fictional space. The distance that physically separates the mountain suburbs from the Cape Flats is collapsed in *Wake Up Dead* to an even greater extent than in *Mixed Blood*. In many respects this increases the tension within the novel: there is no escape. But I suspect you are also

making a critical point here about our society. And about our city. And about crime fiction?

Roger Smith: Cape Town is a city divided by race (still) and by wealth. No newsflash there. The way the media reports crime is partial, white and privileged lives still seem to be more valuable.

We do statistics really well in South Africa: 1500 children murdered last year, one in three women will be raped in her lifetime blah blah. What crime fiction should do is give those statistics a face, make the reader live with those people for hours or days. Weirdly, sometimes crime fiction almost seems more real than the newspapers, doesn't it?

Crime Beat: Yes it does. And sometimes I've heard readers say that's why they don't want to read it. It's too close to home.

Roger Smith: And I have great sympathy with that position. I'm always very grateful when South Africans buy my books. Hell, the daily reality of crime is all too depressing, so reading *Wake Up Dead* is way less escapist for a South African than reading a crime novel set in Miami, or Paris or Bangkok.

Crime Beat: As in *Mixed Blood* where the characters were sucked into the city's malevolence, the theme recurs here. What is it about this haphazard nature of evil that intrigues you?

Roger Smith: South African crime doesn't seem to be about Machiavellian geniuses meticulously planning master crimes: we're dealing mostly with the dripping tap of corruption (but that's another story) or opportunistic and drug fuelled crime. You stop your car at the wrong light and bam you're a statistic. You get off the taxi at the wrong moment and you're wearing a toe-tag. For my characters these violent events (and anybody who tells me that South Africa isn't off-the-charts violent is smoking something) hit them when they least expect it. Take their lives into a completely unexpected direction. Karma? Coincidence? Maybe.

Crime Beat: Okay, yeah, that's our crime situation but what does this 'strategy' mean for you as a novelist? Does it mean you go with the flow as the story unfolds with the day-to-day writing or are you working to a plot, or at least some scheme?

Roger Smith: I always begin with an incident that serves as a catalyst, that propels my ensemble cast into conflict with one another. In *Mixed Blood* it was a home invasion. In *Wake Up Dead* it is a carjacking. Both are a little subverted, though.

I usually have an idea for a major event in the middle of the book, a turning point, and some idea of the ending, but that often changes.

When I wrote for film and TV it was a very mechanical process. What I like about writing novels is that you can be looser, let the characters surprise you

and lead you in directions (and take you to depths) you never imagined. If I had it all down, pre-planned and wrapped up, I would hate the writing process. I like being woken up at 3 a.m. by one of my characters telling me what fresh hell to concoct during my next session at the keyboard.

Crime Beat: With *Wake Up Dead* I did detect a different approach to some of the characters. In *Mixed Blood* it was difficult to like any of them, but here the reader empathises with both Roxy Palmer and Billy Afrika. To Roxy first, how do you see her?

Roger Smith: Roxy is American trailer trash from Florida. Grew up with an alcoholic mother and a succession of “daddies”, the last took her picture and her cherry before she was fourteen. But she is beautiful and built a career as a model. Not a supermodel, though, and by the time she was thirty nobody had named a fragrance after her and she came out to Cape Town to find work and a rich husband. Roxy is a gold-digger, sure, and she makes some bad choices, but I like her. And most women who have read the book seem to empathise with the choices she makes.

Crime Beat: And now Billy. From a young age, he’s had a rough ride but he has an idea of right and wrong and he is intent on pursuing it. Despite his apparent amoral stance, we feel deeply for both him and Roxy.

Roger Smith: Billy Afrika grew up poor on the Cape Flats. Joined a gang as a kid. Unfairly accused of being an informer, he was sentenced to death by psycho-in-training, Piper, stabbed and set alight and buried alive. Billy was rescued by a cop, who mentored him, and Billy became a policeman. A tough but honest cop. Until his mentor and partner was murdered, and Billy resigned and went to Iraq to work as a mercenary in order to earn dollars to send home to his late partner’s family. When the pay cheques dry up, he comes back to Cape Town to look for his money, and he’s going to get it, no matter what. You may question Billy’s methods, but you can’t fault his motives.

Crime Beat: The thing about Billy, I thought, was that he’s not all selfish (neither it turns out is Roxy). There is some consideration for others, even if this consideration is a means to an end. For example, he and Roxy form a kind of partnership. In fact it’s this ‘partnership’ which is their salvation. In a way I thought Billy was the story’s conscience. Yes? No?

Roger Smith: Well, Billy is pretty selfless. Roxy, initially narcissistic and self-seeking, moves toward some understanding that there is a world beyond herself.

The “partnership” between Roxy and Billy was interesting for me. Conventionally, they would have ended up in the sack. But I resisted that, and many readers have remarked on how pleased they are that I didn’t go for that cliché.

Yes, Billy is the conscience of the book, I guess. But he also reflects a very particular world view that allows for extreme responses. Responses that many

people would find anti-social. But not in our anti-society, perhaps, which is quite an indictment.

Crime Beat: The twosome that cause the mayhem, Disco and Piper (leaving aside Goddy) are creations from hell, certainly Piper is. Are these figures from your imagination, or, as I suspect is more likely, have aspects of our fellow citizens and history fed into their creation?

Roger Smith: Both Disco and Piper are products of my imagination, but with Piper I had a lot of help. Like Roxy, Disco is beautiful, but his beauty is also a curse. Orphaned young, he was one of those lost boys out on the Flats, became a tik-head and ended up in prison, where Piper took him as a “wife” and developed an obsessive love for him. Many readers find Disco the most tragic figure in the book.

Crime Beat: The critique in *Wake Up Dead* is of the prison system that allows the numbers gangs to flourish, that strips humanity from the inmates. You actually did some research here, didn't you?

Roger Smith: I've visited prisons, and met ex-cons. One man in particular, who served over thirty years in prison, served as a model for Piper. This man, Ice, rose to be a general in the 27s prison gang, fell in love with his prison “wife”, and committed crimes in prison – including a brutal murder – in order to stay inside, where he had power and prestige. I shot an interview with him, which is up on [my website](#) and he evokes the prison environment more eloquently than I ever could.

Crime Beat: Violence is a necessary part of a Smith novel. And it's not something you are going to shy away from. What's your thinking behind the role of violence in crime fiction?

Roger Smith: *Wake Up Dead* was written as a response to the bloodlust and savagery that characterises crime in South Africa, and more particularly the Flats. I really wanted to jack into the zeitgeist: the tik-fuelled mayhem that keeps Die Son in business. Only now (two years after I wrote it) can I see how fast *Wake Up Dead* is, speedy in an almost chemical sense. So violence is right and proper, in the context of the book. For me it's simple: if it's realistic, it's OK. If it's titillating, it's not. I don't think people are going to read *Wake Up Dead* and go “wow, let's hit a tik pipe and go and disembowel somebody.” They're more likely to be shocked. As they should be.

Crime Beat: In an interview you said that you felt Quentin Tarantino manipulates our response to violence in his movies, that we relish the violence, that we're not repelled by it? Is it the humour that you think deflects the seriousness of the violence?

Roger Smith: Listen, I enjoy Tarantino, and submit willingly to his manipulation. He is a very smart film maker. What I call the “Tarantino-effect” is when violence becomes caricatured, removed from reality – a source of pleasurable stimulation.

Beating my old drum here, but I have problems with such a depiction of violence within the context of our rabidly violent society. Just as I have problems with shying away from that violence, wishing it away, and presenting a sanitized and fantastical image of this country. Bullshitting, in other words.

Crime Beat: For all the horror and graphic honesty in *Wake Up Dead* and *Mixed Blood*, there is a very soft heart to Roger Smith, which manifests itself in *Wake Up Dead* particularly. The genre's conventions call for redemption but I suspect that you are not simply bowing to convention. I suspect you are providing light in the darkness. My phrasing here is vague but it has to do with the end of your novel and I don't want to spoil it, but unfortunately we cannot comment on it. So: are you obeying the convention of the crime novel as a fairy tale; or are you offering something more?

Roger Smith: Well, I think the primary convention of the noir sub-genre (and I think *Wake Up Dead* is pretty noir) is that nobody is redeemed. But I've messed with that convention just a little. Conventions are cool, but I think the demands of the story are paramount and I followed my gut. I'm saying no more, because that would spoil the ending.