

You're never too old to spy

South Africa boasts two Nobel Prize winning authors but has never produced a John le Carre or Ian Fleming. Strange, when the success of South African intelligence operations have, from time to time, been the envy of intelligence agencies the world over.



By [Tracy Gilpin](#) 1 Oct 2014

Authors like Deon Meyer and Chris Marnewick include an element of spycraft in their more recent crime stories, but Trevor Corbett has the lonely distinction of being the only South African today who writes pure espionage.

So why is it easier to spot a Voortrekker bonnet at an EFF rally than a South African spy thriller on a shelf?

Where have all the (SA) spy thrillers gone?

The easy answer is that in post-apartheid South Africa, authors have attempted to distance themselves from a tainted past its secrets and present-day repercussions, but world trends do not support this theory.

The reputation of Israel's intelligence agency - the Mossad - remains legendary despite its share of analytical and operational bungles. Former Mossad spy, Mishka Ben-David, released his first spy thriller in 2013, *Duet in Beirut*, which became an instant bestseller. The Manning/Snowden revelations have done little to tarnish the image of CIA and British intelligence agents in film and literature. If anything, they're more popular than ever with blockbuster serials like *Homeland* and *The Blacklist*. Sandra Brown's *Deadline* has reached number two on Publisher's Weekly mass market bestseller list in recent weeks.

Fourie Botha, publisher at Random House Struik's Umuzi imprint says, "We don't get many spy thriller submissions. Most submissions feature policemen and private investigators. Many submissions of thrillers are set in the world of, mostly corrupt business."

A secret is a secret

Call them what you will - spy, espionage, intrigue or political thrillers - they are described as the international equivalent of the gothic castle with its moving panels, secret passages and hidden conspirators.

Corbett, who worked for the National Intelligence Service and is now a counter-intelligence strategist for the State Security Agency, authored *An Ordinary Day* and *Allegiance*. He believes scarcity of source material on which to base plots might discourage authors from working in the genre. "The world of intelligence and espionage is largely misunderstood by the general population and there are very few sources where authors outside the profession can get material. The DNA of intelligence is secrecy. People love knowing secrets, but writers have to rely on their imagination and ideas of what real world intelligence is to make stories authentic. This is hard. Who do you ask? Spies, generally, keep secrets secret."

Dirty tricks

There remain wounds the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was unable to close. Still-dangerous truths many would rather keep hidden about the identities of askari and impimpis, and illegal operations on foreign soil. But South Africans have become proficient at dressing up fact as fiction while still relaying the essential truth contained in those facts. Nadine Gordimer said: "Nothing factual that I write or say will be as truthful as my fiction." A sentiment shared by Fourie Botha: "Novels needn't use facts to speak the truth."

Former advocate, now full time writer, Chris Marnewick, has authored *The Soldier Who Said No*, *A Sailor's Honour* and the acclaimed *Shepherds and Butchers*. "For *A Sailor's Honour*, I knew the facts of an historical event buried under heaps of paper in the TRC's files. I also knew about third-force activity in certain historical events in South Africa, including the spy

of the HIV virus. I decided to use this to constitute the factual part of the novel. I believe that history has to be recorded by those living through it. There is too much of South Africa's past and recent past that is hidden from public view."

Coming in from the cold

Referring to the declining popularity of novels; author, publisher and current Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, Sophie Cunningham, says, "Curiosity and empathy are not values being encouraged in the present political climate and it could be that it is precisely because the novel is an intrinsically political form that readers aren't as interested in it as they once were."

Spy or political thrillers can be an important way for South Africans to explore their country of vast linguistic and cultural diversity, not only as a nation, but how we fit into a shifting global socio-political landscape of allies and common enemies, past and present. "Fiction," says Cunningham, "offers creative freedoms that allow authors to reach truths that non-fiction writers, constrained by facts, can't always find."

Corbett reveals: "Real world intelligence officers are glad they have been portrayed in a more positive light. It's a thankless job. Ever heard of SA intelligence community members getting medals or being interviewed after a success? It's a lonely world, the spy world. Really, the only excitement is getting caught."

Advice for spies and writers

Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* children's books were published in the 1960s and banned from many schools and libraries for, "teaching children to lie, spy, back-talk and curse". Ex-CIA officer, Lindsay Moran, says the series was the driving inspiration for her career. In the words of Harriet, "You can't be too old to spy except if you were fifty you might fall off a fence escape, but you could spy around on the ground a lot." Or you could become a writer.

ABOUT TRACY GILPIN

Tracy Gilpin is the author of the *Marks and Lambrecht Series* published in the UK and Europe. The South African spy thrillers - *Bold-Faced Lie*, *The Slave Tree*, and *Rain of Ashes* - are now available as eBooks. Twitter: @TracyGilpinBook
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