

*Life is a Thriller: investigating African crime fiction: selected papers from the 9<sup>th</sup> International Janheinz Jahn Symposium, Mainz 2008*; edited by Anja Oed and Christine Matzke, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe, 2012, 246 pp. ISBN 978-3-89645830-8. Euros 29.80.

One of my secret pleasures is to read fiction and call it 'work' although I have not yet reached the stage of claiming the purchase price of popular novels against tax. This volume helps me justify and validate the practice as one of the secrets of a highly effective Africanist. The last two decades have seen a great increase in the number of thrillers and whodunnits by African authors and with African settings. Some of them have considerable literary merit and have earned an international readership. Most engage with political and economic issues. Now they are attracting serious scholarly attention.

The conference which led to this volume was the first ever comparative symposium on African crime fiction. Participants came from three continents, with German scholars particularly prominent, and presentations covered crime fiction in nine languages. Practising writers played a full part alongside scholars from a range of disciplines. The best papers from the conference and some specially commissioned were skilfully edited into this volume in three regional groupings – Southern Africa, West and Central Africa and East Africa. (This prompts the question – is the genre also taking root in North Africa and in Arabic? – and if not why not?). Also included are transcripts of interviews with Deon Meyer, Ben R. Mtobwa, Angela Makholwa and Meshack Masondo. The Tanzanian Ben Mtobwa died shortly after the conference and the book is dedicated to his memory.

The editors indicate five overarching themes cutting across the regional arrangement. What is distinctively African about African crime fiction? How do writers handle setting and location? What is the audience for African crime fiction and how does this relate to questions of language and translation and African publishing patterns and structures? What is the role of religion, spirituality and the supernatural in African crime fiction? How do African writers use, adapt and change narrative structures and the tropes and clichés of the genre.

Of the fifteen chapters, my personal favourite was Matthias Kring's 'Meet Lance Spearman – your favourite crime-buster'. Lance Spearman was the hero of the photo-novel 'Black Film' an offshoot of *Drum*, whose cliff-hanging adventures and narrow escapes from a variety of bizarre and villainous enemies were followed avidly by boys and young men over much of Anglophone Africa. I shall also seek out Monica Genya's creation, the feisty but essentially feminine Kenyan intelligence agent, Susan Juma.

Christine Matzke provides a "preliminary checklist of African and African and African-Diasporic crime novels" in English, engagingly entitled 'Of guns, ghosts and gangsters' from which Acquisitions Librarians, as well as

aficionados, should take careful notes. The checklist is prefaced by some scholarly explanations and a personal note, with which this reviewer can easily identify:

For many years I have been reading and enjoying crime fiction by African and African- diasporic writers...My book shelves filled, as did my mental list of works I still wanted to read. My initial curiosity became a mild addiction, with the occasional feverish bout. Part of my affliction lay in the reading pleasure, part of it in the actual detection of new or long forgotten texts. (p.203)

However, the list already needs updating to include, for example, Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* and *Black Star Nairobi*.

Readers with appetites whetted by this review should also refer to <http://www.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/afrika/krimi1.html>, where Hartmut Bergenthum and colleagues from Frankfurt University Library share their reading experiences and recommendations of crime thrillers in and from Africa. For South African crime fiction there is also a blog – <http://crimebeat.bookslive.co.za/blog/> – and a special issue of the journal *Current Writing* (25(2), 2013) devoted to 'Crime Fiction, South Africa'.

*Terry Barringer*