

*My Serial Killer and Other Stories* by Stephen Gray (Jacana)

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*My Serial Killer* is a short novel about ... well, about a serial killer, the “my” referring to his relationship with the narrator, a middle-aged AIDS information officer, who picks up the young man in question and harbours him until his serial killing habits become inconvenient.

I am not betraying anything here that the title and the blurb don't tell the prospective reader: this is not a whodunit or a novel of suspense. It is, rather, a disillusioned survey of a society perceived by the narrator as sick unto death, serial killing in this analysis being a manifestation of this larger social malaise: “I concluded that that was what you arrived at in an anarchic society. Without clear moral leadership, only shining examples of corruption and big spending and sloth throughout the system, you got dysfunctional citizens, their bodies cooling down at one's embrace. But this was not the first time we'd been governed poorly in South Africa.”

I don't know what a criminologist would make of this analysis of the roots of serial killing, nor a political analyst of the implied parallel between pre- and post-1994 South Africa. These are matters of opinion; I am more concerned with the effect of these convictions on the novel.

This is an angry novel, and the anger distorts the fictional fabric. There is of course plenty to be angry about in our government's handling of the AIDS crisis, and there is room for some savage satire here. But the anger may cause the satire to bleed, as it were, into areas that have little or nothing to do with governance. In this instance, the official line on AIDS is represented by a provincial Minister of Health, Professor Picton-Ramabalama, who arrives for a meeting two and three-quarters hours late: “Then of course she put her bangled arms together, her great frizzy head on them and fell asleep.” Waking up, the Minister delivers a diatribe against condoms and homosexuals alike: “And I tell you ... all condoms are rubbish! Rubbish! If God had wanted condoms, you would have been born with one on! ... And if you still want a condom, and stick it up between the bums, you know what happens – ... It breaks anyway, that's what. And that's how you get AIDS transmission, my friend.”

Telling a friend about this later, the narrator and his protégé, the serial killer Hennie, have this to say:

“‘And the irony of it all is,’ I added.

‘What's irony?’ said Hennie.

‘Later, Hennie. She knows perfectly well her menfolk like to take their *women* from behind. Because it's their age-old method of contraception. All the fun, and no children. Not that their women know the difference, they've had so many clitoridectomies.’

‘What's a clitora-’ said Hennie.

‘Shush, man.’

We watched Frank push a peanut about, giving a vague smile, almost admiring the two of us.”

What is disturbing here is the shift from the satire at the expense of a particular approach to AIDS to generalisations about “them” and “their” that are grossly racist. Now fiction has space even for such views, but it does demand that they be contextualised within a

narrative strong enough to absorb and relativise them; and here, unfortunately, this is not the case.

The novel puts so much of its energy into social criticism that it neglects the primitive matter of characterisation and plot. Hennie/Eric/Derek, the serial killer, is very thinly drawn: a generic pretty boy with blue eyes and blonde hair, rough trade, poor background, starved for love and understanding (“You’ve never fallen in love before because nobody ever loved you”): it needs some strong individualisation to animate such a stock figure. But here there is little to give substance to the outline, and what there is, is contradictory. Hennie at times sound barely literate, as we are told he is, but then again can become almost pompous: asked whether he’s ever slept with a woman, he replies: “It’s too complicated to explain, but it so happens I haven’t had much opportunity in that direction.”

The plot of the novel is as perfunctory as the characterisation. Frank, the almost-admiring audience to the interchange above, is the narrator’s oldest friend, married but clearly in denial. He is duly brought out (with the help of Hennie) and he and the narrator settle down to life together; but they lose interest in each other in the space of two sentences, and Frank disappears from the novel.

An Israeli couple, much oppressed with the lack of opportunity for homosexual expression in Israel, come to visit, pledge their troth, go back to Israel, and disappear from the novel, except for the odd phone call.

First helping Hennie to escape and then deciding to try to have him apprehended, the narrator seeks out a succession of Hennie’s clients, which produces a series of interviews with various people who promptly disappear from the novel. The pursuit itself fizzles out. Hennie appears one night with two henchmen, and robs the narrator. Hennie then disappears from the novel, to be somewhat anti-climactically apprehended by a member of the Rhema church. In court Hennie makes a long speech in his own defence which comes to nothing; he is sent to prison and the novel dwindles to an end.

In short, this is not Gray’s best work. It is fortunate that this edition also contains ten short stories previously published elsewhere, to remind us of what he is capable of. The much-anthologised “The Building-Site” gives us a more nuanced and individualised version of proletarian eroticism, as does “A Lodge in the Wilderness”. “A True Romance” does the rent-boy-with-a heart-of gold more convincingly and touchingly than *My Serial Killer*; and “Human Interest” takes on the matter of race in post-apartheid South Africa more originally. In the end, *My Serial Killer and Other Stories* is memorable for the Other Stories.