

*Payback* by Mike Nicol (Umuzi) R165

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Enthusiasts of the crime novel, more specifically the sub-genre Cape Town crime, have reason to rejoice in the appearance of Mike Nicol's latest. His previous novel, *Out to Score*, co-authored with Joanne Hichens, was a masterpiece of sleaze, with its low-life heroes, Mullet Mendes and Vincent Saldana, ex-policemen turned private investigators, operating from a filthy office and subsisting on brandy and instant coffee.

Now Nicol has repeated but adapted the formula. Again we have two colleagues: Mace Bishop and Pylon Buso are ex-gunrunners, now partners in Complete Security, dedicated to keeping rich beautiful people safe from the depredations of poor ugly people.

But as down-at-heel as Mullet and Mendes were, so well-shod are Mace and Pylon. They are in fact seriously cool. Their offices are on trendy Dunkley Square, habitat of models and architects; Mace is married to Oumou, a beautiful Malian ceramicist, drives an Alfa Spider and buys and renovates a Victorian gem in the City Bowl; Pylon, a Xhosa, is married to the equally appealing Treasure. Both have a daughter, Christa and Pumla respectively. The two families, in tasteful shades of black, brown and white, attend sunset concerts at Kirstenbosch. The partners drink only espresso, cappuccino or, at a pinch, latte. For stronger stuff they have single malt whisky. Mace swims at the Point (now a Virgin Active gym) and has a six-pack stomach. Locations include the Carrera in Santiago, the Meurice in Paris, the Kempinski in Berlin and of course the Mount Nelson in Cape Town. Two of Mace's clients are in Cape Town for the Mother City Queer Project. It's a far cry from the haunts of Mullet and Saldana, though the behaviour of the upper crust is not much better than that of the dregs.

Gunrunners are not fiction's favourite heroes, but Nicol cannily absolves his pair (partly) by telling us that they ran guns in a good cause, namely the Struggle. In short, they ran guns for the ANC, which now usefully gives them an entrée to high-ups in government, like the enigmatic Mo Siq, who can't see why all those munitions stockpiled by the previous regime should be left to moth and rust when there are people out there willing to pay good money for them. The view we are given of yesterday's struggle heroes is disenchanted, to say the least: Nicol's book is amongst other things a sharp take on contemporary South Africa, including the prescient comment that "Locals had a hatred for foreigners, especially those with enterprise."

The plot is dizzyingly complex, featuring some hefty coincidences and a large number of international crooks with names that end on vowels. There's not very much to choose between Paulo, Ludovico and Francisco, but Isabella, who has a history with Mace, has a slight moral edge on the murderous and really rather disagreeable Vittoria, to whom cocaine is as honey was to Pooh bear. Vittoria, as it happens, can't stand Isabella ...

Closer to home, and as fiercely moral as these others are ravenously hedonistic, is the mysterious Sheemina February, lawyer to Pagad (People against Drugs and Gangsterism), an organisation that in the late nineties made it their business to plant bombs in establishments deemed to foster drug use. She is assisted by a colourful array of goons and thugs ready to do her bidding, and has a sinister obsession with Mace ...

It's a heady mix, and Nicol stirs it with vigour, inventiveness, wit and a good dash of sadism. Like its predecessor, *Payback* is not for the squeamish. Cat lovers in particular should exercise discretion.

Not the least of the pleasures of Nicol's book, for Capetonian readers, will be his meticulous tracing of the city's topography: every car journey is plotted, every restaurant is named (the book opens in the Café Paradiso and closes in the Gardens café), every landmark marked. For the picky reviewer, one of the more ignoble pleasures is catching Nicol out, which this reviewer succeeded in only three times: he calls Molteno Road Molteno Avenue, twice places Cape Town International on the N1 rather than the N2, and gives the attorney Sheemina February offices in Huguenot Chambers, which is in fact the exclusive preserve of advocates. There is also some illogical business with a cellphone: "Mace dialled the cellphone number used to call Oumou, found out it belonged to a woman who'd had her phone stolen the previous week." So how come she's still got the number?

But these are obviously the quibbles of a reviewer anxious not to seem soft. *Payback* is a great read, pacy, cool, hard-bitten and hard-hitting. The laconic, street-smart style is so convincingly laid-back that it may blind the reader to the artistry of the writing, which is taut and economical. *Payback* is perfect for the wet week-ends ahead – or, up north, the cold nights.

Mike Nicol seems well set to take his place with Deon Meyer and Margie Orford as Cape Town's Gang of Three. Just don't get him to take you to the airport.