

Shark by Carel van der Merwe (Umuzi) R195
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Rather like Alistair Morgan's *Sleeper's Wake*, reviewed here recently, *Shark* sets up a narrator that's damaged goods, and then grants a certain universality to his views. Not that a worm's eye view is necessarily invalid: it's just not as universal as the worm tends to think. The same holds true for a shark's eye view.

The book's protagonist, the super-shark Stephen Winter, CEO of Sirius Corp, has no illusions about himself or the world in which he cuts a figure: "Everybody has a price," he believes. "There are no exceptions." Of course, the very absoluteness of this is seductive, far more than a more wishy-washy statement like "Most people have their price. There are exceptions, of course." But a moment's thought will tell us that the wishy-washy statement is truer than the more trenchantly absolute one. Ultimately, Winter reminds us of Conrad's statement that the man who says he has no illusions has at least that one.

The cast that van der Merwe assembles seems hand-picked to exemplify Winter's cynical adage. There is the old money, the men and women born into a ruthless morality that they have come to accept as normal business practice. These self-styled aristocrats of the business world made their bargain with the old regime, and they are prepared to make their bargain with the new.

Which is where the new money enters the equation. The new regime turns out to drive a hard bargain. The beneficiaries of black empowerment, in van der Merwe's rendering, are quite as cynical about their function as the white corporations that bribe them to provide the requisite dash of colour on the Board. They know what they are there for, and they intend to be paid for it: "It is money, not power, that turns the politicians first into pigs, then sharks," says Winter. Furthermore, with their links to government they can facilitate the granting of a valuable tender – for, of course, a healthy consideration.

One such tender in fact forms the backbone of the novel. One of Winter's subsidiaries is tendering to provide the software for a new electronic ID card to be implemented by the Department of Home Affairs. The Minister of Home Affairs lets it be known that he will favour Sirius Corp's bid only if it has as its empowerment partner Amandla Holdings, run, as it happens, by the Minister's son-in-law, Godfrey Mtambo, whose "struggle credentials" Winter knows to be as fraudulent as all his other dealings.

Not that Winter is put off by this blatant blackmail: as an old hand at the game, he plays along, confident that in the long run he will out-manoeuvre his "partner". Only occasionally does he take stock of his life: "Sometimes it seems to him that he lives in a world of caricatures: corrupt politicians, rapacious lawyers, ambitious underlings, wannabe black tycoons, a gallery of grotesques."

On this showing, there is no alternative, in a society such as ours, to the gallery of grotesques. But, although there is no explicit counter to the shark's philosophy in the novel (there is nobody with the moral authority to deliver it), van der Merwe uses the whole novel as a corrective. Indeed, *Shark* has something of an old-fashioned morality tale about it in the relentlessness with which it enacts the familiar sentiment that money can't buy you happiness. For Winter, though he derives a certain satisfaction from his business success, is never truly content. He despises the people he has to lunch with, is bored with the meetings he has to attend, finds golf a boring game, "has had his fill of

dawn and dusk game drives and peering into the bush for a glimpse of a lion or a giraffe”, and even his trophy wife gives him little other than occasional sexual satisfaction, in between banging her golfing instructor.

Van der Merwe uses his protagonist to good effect as a sardonic commentator on his fellow-sharks: “These urban Afrikaners and their affectation for the wild: deep down they still consider themselves rugged outdoorsmen, their luxury SUVs the latter-day equivalents of the ox-wagons on which their stubborn forebears ventured into the hinterland.” Indeed, the novel works best at the level of acerbic social commentary, though the plot is quite gripping enough to keep the reader’s attention. *Shark* is, apart from anything else, a ripping good read.

Although van der Merwe is not so sentimental to suggest that his shark has a heart of gold after all, he does gradually build up a back story for Winter that enables us to understand if not like him. And as Winter finds himself trapped in a web of his own making, he glimpses, too late, the possibility of a simpler and more satisfying life. The new South Africa has yielded, recently, *The Club*, Edyth Bulbring’s horrifying dissection of South Africa as an elite private school, and *High, Low and In-between*, Imraan Coovadia’s disenchanted look at public medicine. Now van der Merwe’s grimly efficient dissection of the corporate world joins these state-of-the-nation novels to suggest that writers can, like the rest of us, get on just fine without apartheid: as long as people remain corrupt, rapacious and ambitious, there’ll always be something to write about. Just don’t expect love stories.