



SA seen from beyond the border

Two recent novels written by 'outsiders' offer a salutary and refreshing perspective

LEON DE KOCK

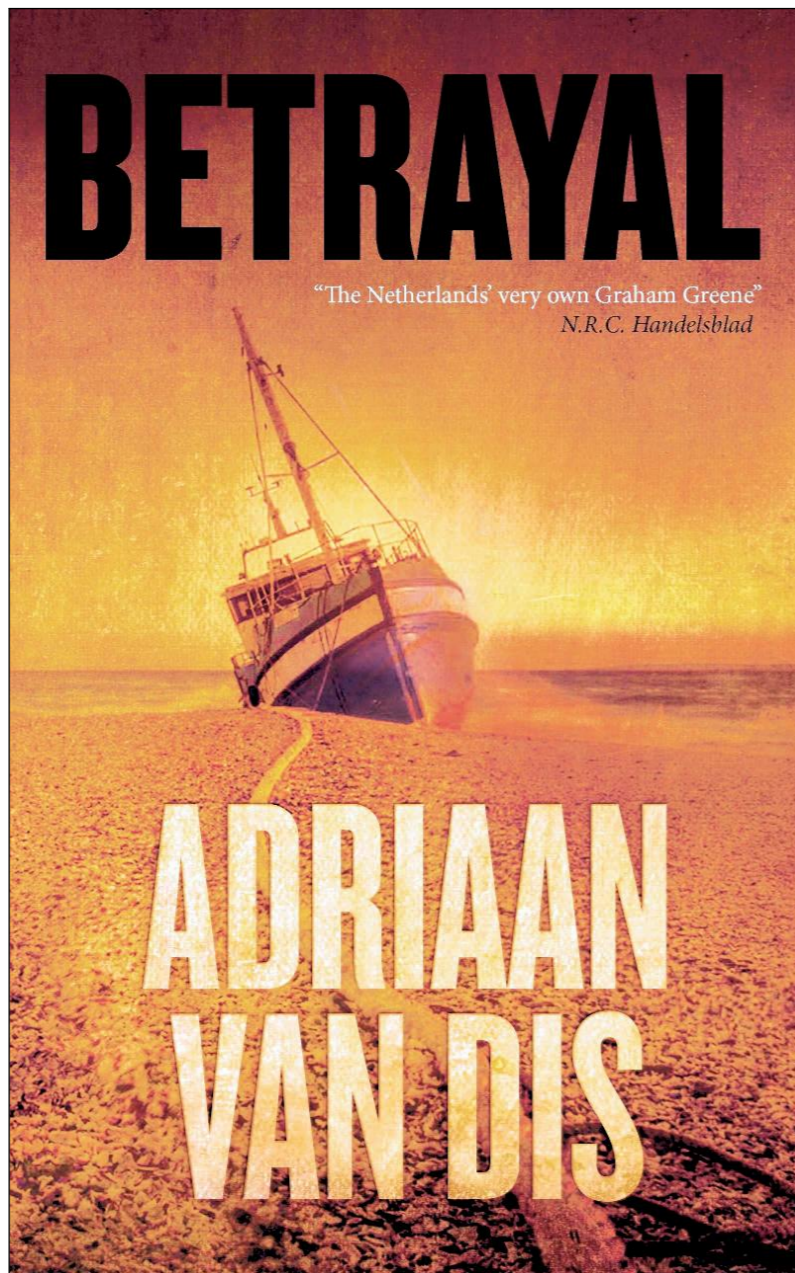
ONE OF the effects of the globalisation of the novel, leading to that contentious creature referred to nowadays as "world literature" – a supposedly "post-national" phenomenon – is that anyone can now, more easily, write about anywhere, including South Africa.

In the old days of struggle literature, "outsiders" would tread warily on "insider" turf, and writing about South Africa from an outsider point of view tended to take the form of non-fiction rather than confidently imagined novels which delivered commentary on the "state of the nation". No more.

Two recent novels show that commentary from outside is both salutary and refreshing: Adrian van Dis's *Betrayal* (excellently translated from the Dutch, *Tikkop*, by Ina Rilke, Macleah Press, London) and Patrick Flanery's *Absolution* (Riverhead, New York, 2012).

Flanery's novel attracted at least one local review in which his characterisation of South African mannerisms was questioned, but on the whole his novel is absorbing, if somewhat bland. It has received good reviews, especially in the international media.

Van Dis's *Betrayal*, the more recent of the two, raises some interesting issues. It is a riveting tale of post-apartheid disillusionment which plays out in a little Cape fishing village where Mulder, an old "struggle" collaborator from the Netherlands, meets up once again with a formerly exiled Afrikaner ANC comrade.



Their lives conjoin in the stewardship of Hendrik, an intelligent coloured teenager who is addicted to tik and who – at a critical moment in the novel – must choose between material and spiritual goods, raising the issue of what is known in contemporary scholarship as "uneven modernities".

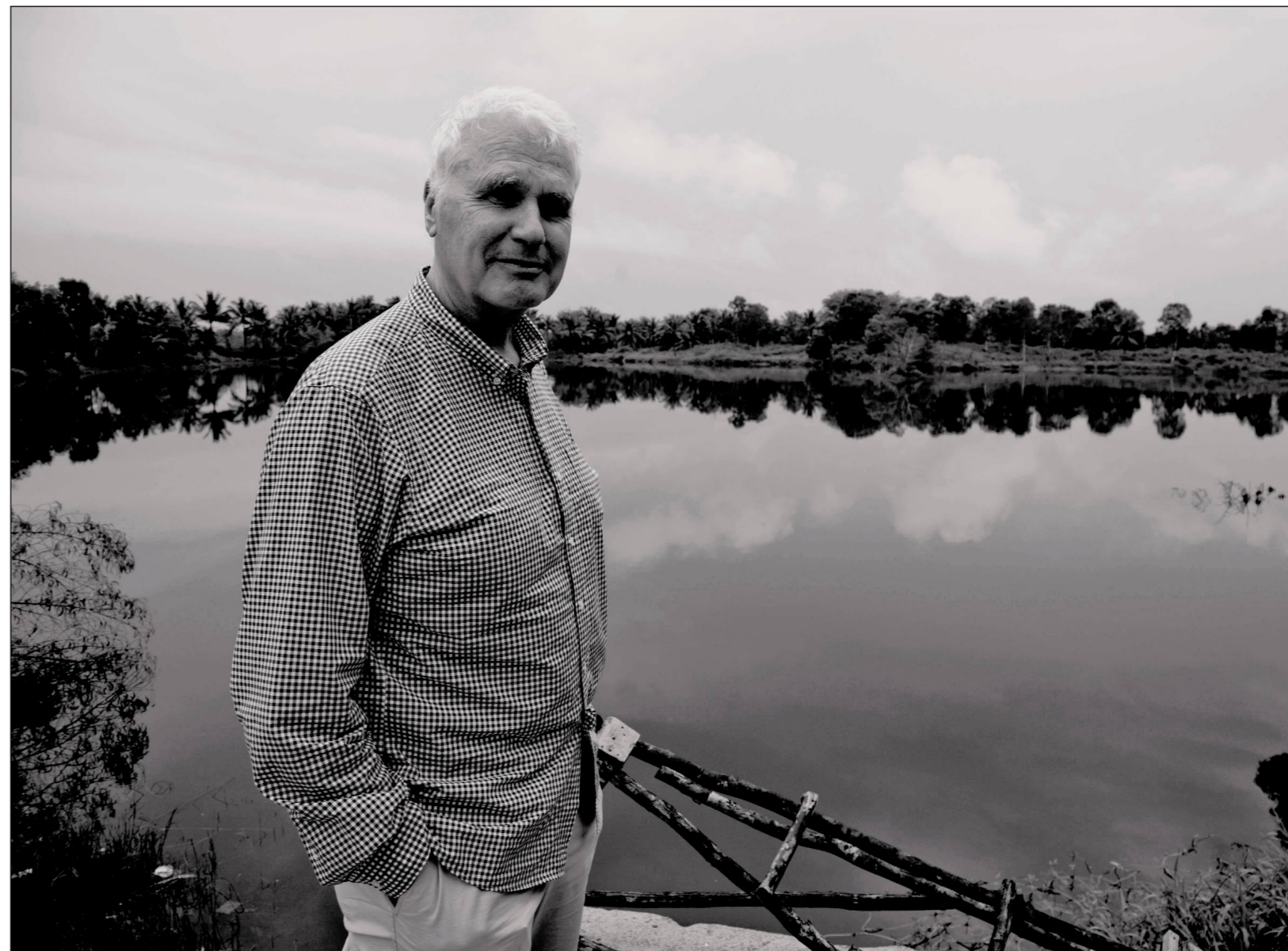
Instead of accepting the good intentions of the two well-off former struggle "heroes" and their way of helping him get his life back into shape through education, Hendrik instead runs away with their stuff: a laptop computer, a hairdryer and the rich silver belonging to the wealthy old house where he's been put up by the rebel scion of patriarchal Afrikanerdom.

What else did these whiteys expect? Imagine for a moment the possibility – at this late stage in the post-industrial era, and more than

10 years into the new millennium – that you still have never seen a lighted oven, not to mention a gleamingly slim computer containing Google Earth and info on coolude Chinese punks?

Or, even worse – you see these goodies via their media representations, on massive advertising boards, flapping in the wind as newspaper images, mockingly out of your reach, but you're supposed to make peace with the fact that Facebook and Twitter are for the rich only. And for the most part, that means for whites only, even in 2013.

Hendrik's destiny, as he sees it, is a life without gadgets and connectivity, and although Van Dis occasionally pushes the limits in his characterisation of a rural coloured boy who has never before seen an oven, it's nevertheless a no-brainer when such a boy must choose between



IDENTITY ISSUES: Adriaan van Dis has written a riveting tale of post-apartheid disillusionment.

modernity's goodies on the one hand, and Protestant values like forbearance and patience on the other.

Tens of thousands of Hendriks can still be found across the world, many of them in Africa, and many in South Africa's poor, semi-rural areas (not to mention its townships) where modernity – in the form of both electric ovens and electronic gadgets like iPads and hairdryers – is still mostly absent, or very unevenly distributed.

Imagine, then, that you are one of the people at the butt-end of contemporary modernity, and two bossy old white men (who are mistakenly seen as "homos" by the local fishermen) try to "help" you after your prostitute mother landed up in hospital because floods washed her shanty away.

You must choose between imma-

terial goods (education, independence, honesty, nobility of character) and immediate gratification, in the form of both hardware and software which places the modern world in your lap, so to speak.

Who in their right mind would choose "values"? If you've never before felt an iPad in your hands? To hell with values! Let's rather have something valuable for a change, the stuff that everyone else except the Hendriks of the world seem to have already, long ago...

"Uneven modernities", in this way of thinking, is the story of post-apartheid and how lofty ideals such as "liberation" and "equality" – indeed the cornerstones of the Freedom Charter – have mostly bitten the dust.

As a result, everyone grabs what they can, when they can, as we see so readily in the political culture of

material entitlement at home and elsewhere in the post-colonial world. The hunger for "stuff" is just too big to sustain an ethos of patience and sacrifice.

This is also the difference between Van Dis's white characters and the people of colour in *Betrayal*. They feel betrayed by the new deal. They have been left behind, and they are determined to close the material gap – call them nouveau riche or corrupt if you like – before they'll be willing to entertain big words like "sacrifice" and "patience".

What comes off especially badly in Van Dis's novel is the rather cute post-colonial virtue of "hybridity", through which formulas are created for the world's "others", especially "syncretic" identities in which traditional qualities are supposedly fused with modern ones.

When the struggle-types in this novel try to convince Hendrik that he should be proud of his "bastardisation" (another favourite post-colonial term), Hendrik rejects the notion out of hand.

He types the word "Hotnot" into Google and says, without blinking: "Me, I don't have slave blood in my veins, and even if I do have a drop, I'll piss it out like I pissed out the tik."

The message is clear: he will choose his identity, not the whiteys, and the identity he picks for himself will have nothing at all to do with slavery and/or white paternalism.

In the final analysis, it's the Chinese punk kid who steals Hendrik's heart. And for that he needs the hairdryer.

De Kock is professor of English at Stellenbosch University.