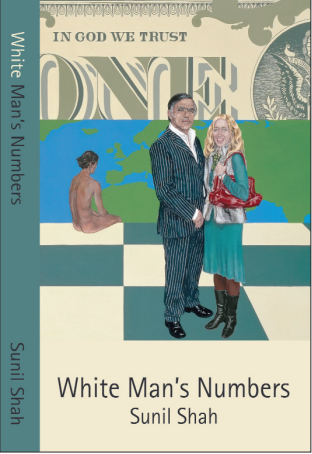


Shah’s page-turner shows banking baddies’ greed, lust and killer intent



WHITE MAN'S NUMBERS
Sunil Shah
Ciaran Blackhall Publishing
REVIEW: **Diane Cassere**

IT IS always refreshing when a totally new genre of baddies is offered to literature, and in Sunil Shah's first book we meet the corporate asset managers. Although the role they play on the stage of money manipulation is much more intricate – that's the bankers to you and me.

Absolutely no play on words there – that's the whole truth behind the bad guys in *White Man's Numbers*. They are respectable men and women in suits, working behind the grand façades and in the fascinating corporate world of money management. These are the people we are supposed to trust. But recent history has turned up some real nasties and, around the globe, people are pointing to the money boys and girls as being behind the continuing recession.

Citizens are picketing the main arteries of finance. Shah is able to move through the jargon-infested world they inhabit to make them accessible to us and let us learn how they operate. In various times, best-sellers have focused on the Mafia, hit-men, commen, psychopaths, serial killers, rogue detectives and all manner of criminals. Seldom have villains looked as good and presented themselves as well as Shah's characters. But beneath the veneer

lurks greed, lust and killer intent. Shah is a chartered accountant and has walked in their world, although in his acknowledgements he states he has parted amicably and voluntarily from all his previous employers. The first chapter of *White Man's Numbers* is a stunner. It becomes a page-turner instantly. You really care about what happens to young Ravi Dharmia. The rest of the characters are finely drawn too, from sin-

ister Richard to carefree Jacob – a nice note of cynicism in an early account of lunch in the luxury London flat of Jacob's communist, and very well-connected, South African father. The book offers a love story intertwined with crime fiction. A background tapestry is the lives of Indian men and women living in Western capitals. It also touches on drugs in the corporate world, arranged marriages and the underbelly of our society. While Shah shares Ravi's early life – growing up in an

Indian community in Kenya and studying in London – this book is South African to the core, and in particular walks us through the streets of Cape Town. Local readers will have a sense of recognition as the action unfolds. An interesting perspective is that of Cape Town as seen from a London office as a gateway to the corporate world in South Africa – referred to as beautiful and well-organised, and having great infrastructure. We are an emerging market

and it follows naturally that a major company, like the fictional PAM of the book, would look to this city as a base. But there's the other side to the city – a place of gangs, drugs, politics and poverty. Shah has recognised the duality of the city, the country, and this takes the story swiftly along to an unexpected ending. The author gives us a new voice, and takes us into an exciting genre that we are not yet familiar with. Best of all, he promises us more of the same.

A masterly and vital biography

JM COETZEE: A LIFE IN WRITING
JC Kannemeyer
Jonathan Ball Publishers

REVIEW: **Konstantin Sofianos**

IN AN essay penned in the mid-1990s, the British writer Caryl Phillips reflected on JM Coetzee's novels of that decade, and the shift in literary bearings these seemed to mark for Coetzee.

The urban setting shared by *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* seemed to Phillips “unsuited to Coetzee's lyrical pen”, the action of the books, relayed in a newly “lead, yet precise” prose, unengaging and contrived.

Reviewing *Disgrace* on its appearance two years later, Salman Rushdie flinched at that novel's “bonehard language” and at the perverse detachment with which its distressing storyline is told.

Whatever the merit of these assessments, they are literary judgements – over the past decade or so it has become appreciably more difficult to engage Coetzee's writings simply on those terms.

Coetzee was unexpectedly awarded a second Booker Prize for *Disgrace*, and in 2003 his oeuvre was deservedly acknowledged with the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Many European and US readers would have first encountered Coetzee's work in a post-9/11 climate marked by political turbulence, pervasive unease and a fraying multiculturalism, a cultural temper to which Coetzee's fictions, emerging at once from a tortuous South African political history and from metropolitan lineages of modernism, would have seemed preternaturally attuned.

Coetzee is now unquestionably one of the most esteemed writers in the world, with literally hundreds of critical monographs and academic dissertations devoted to his work.

It was inevitable that Coetzee's global prestige would have an impact on the provincial literary culture of South African letters with which he was once associated. South African literary practitioners

have responded with anxious disavowals, emulation and even abject reverence, a kind of higher intellectual form of Bieber-fever.

In a rapturous review of *Elizabeth Costello*, Marlene van Niekerk, herself a fine novelist, proposed that every South African university should institute a chair exclusively devoted to Coetzee-study.

Coetzee's name has further accrued a looming mystique, subsuming hand-me-down impressions, rumours and apocryphal anecdotes, which effectively interposes itself between the reader and the textual encounter with Coetzee's work, as Imraan Coovadia has most recently complained.

This is a shame: Coetzee's writings contain some of the finest prose and the most haunting evocations in our literature. Like every body of work, however, it is not of uniform quality.

This is certainly one reason why JC Kannemeyer's biography, *JM Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, has been so eagerly anticipated – the hope that it might rebalance our view on the man and his accomplishments, also by addressing persistent topics of lurid speculation, including reports of Coetzee's social weirdness and fraught family life, his arrest in the US in the 1960s, the circumstances around his son's early death and the ANC's public criticism of *Disgrace*, and the motivation behind his eventual emigration to Australia.

We should be grateful that Kannemeyer has substantially achieved this, in his authoritative and rewarding account.

Kannemeyer, who died in December of last year, weeks before the manuscript's final completion, was one of precious few South African scholars adequately equipped to set about this biographer's task. For many decades prominent as a scholar and historian of Afrikaans literature, he had already produced a sequence of distinguished biographies of major Afrikaans novelists, including Etienne Leroux and Jan Rabie.

For his work on Coetzee, Kannemeyer could draw on portions of Coetzee's private

correspondence and other provided materials, and further conducted a series of intensive interviews with Coetzee himself, while also soliciting the testimonies of many of his acquaintances and family-members. At times, it seems as if Kannemeyer had read everything pertinent to his subject.

Kannemeyer's work is a formal biography of the old school, the kind that begins with an extensive account of the subject's grandparents on either side, and concludes with a thick wedge of scholarly acknowledgements.

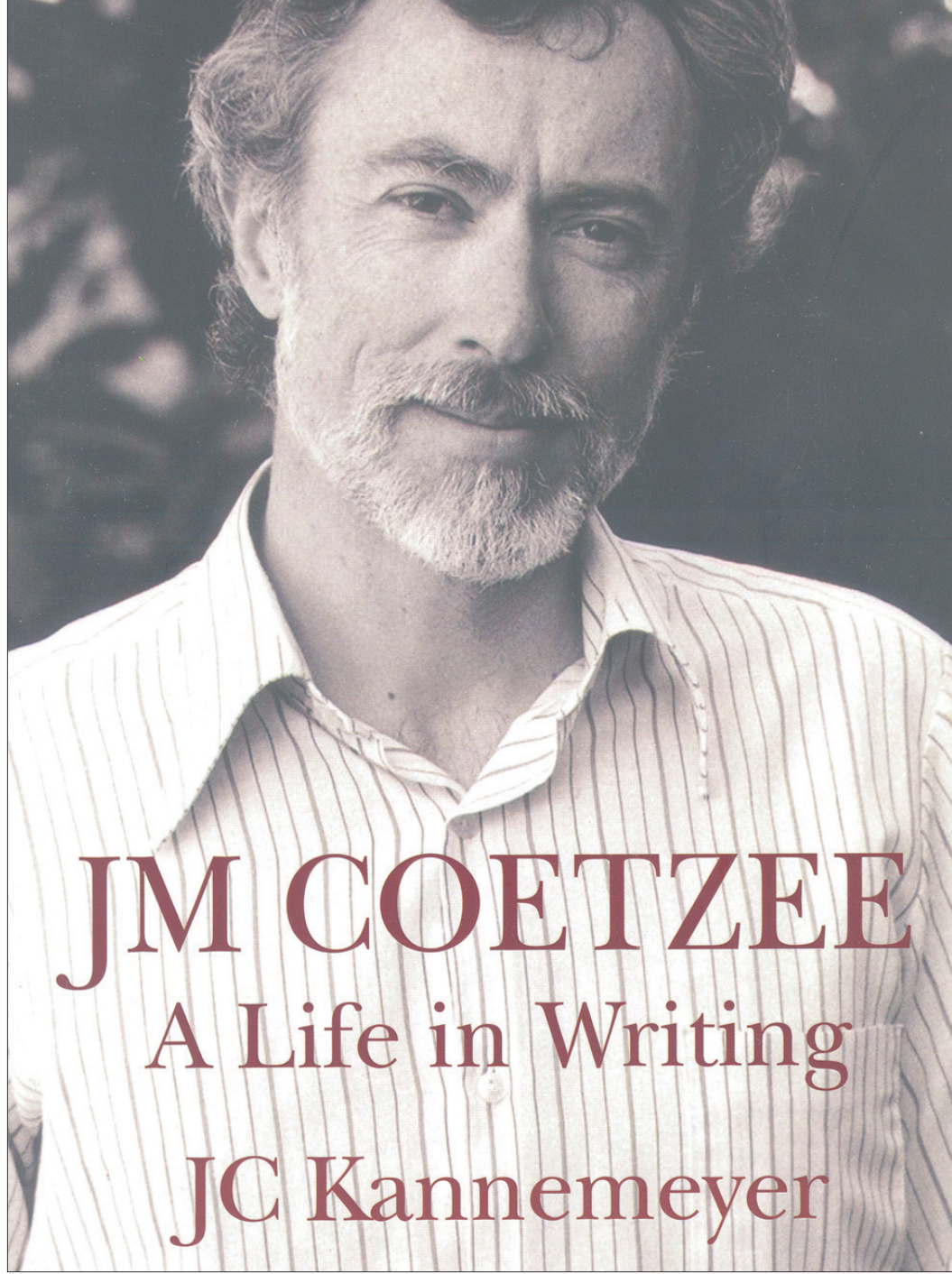
On the face of it, his subject is an unprepossessing one: as Kannemeyer notes at one point, Coetzee spent the years 1969-2001 working as a full-time academic, who additionally strove to spend many hours of each day at his writing-desk, crafting a new fictional work every two to three years from the early 1970s onwards.

Over this period, Coetzee maintained no significant social commitments and was involved in no political actions, besides a declaration on behalf of Rushdie during the latter's fatwa years, which perhaps characteristically mingled courage with a certain opportunism.

Yet the book, rendered in fluid English prose by Michiel Heyns, does not make for dreary reading. In recounting Coetzee's childhood and adolescent years, Kannemeyer liberally quotes from Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs, collected as *Scenes from Provincial Life*, tactfully correcting Coetzee's various infelicities and filling in his notable omissions, which include an early and ultimately unhappy marriage, while leaving some fragments of Coetzee's personal myth-making intact, perhaps questionably.

Proceeding on to the period of Coetzee's writerly activity, Kannemeyer provides a potted account of the social and personal background to the creation of each work, and valuably surveys the reviews that met each work on its publication, whether dismissive, fawning or even-handed.

Only once does Kannemeyer hit out at academic



critics “with their feeble grasp of their medium and their jargon-encumbered utterances” – his own comments on the works are restrained, lucid and frequently illuminating – and only on one occasion does he extend into a personal disquisition on a particular book, rather unconvincingly, when he attempts to defend the uneven late novel *Slow Man* from possible criticism. The book is enlivened by the occasional incidence of under-

stated humour, as when Kannemeyer parodies the opening of *Disgrace*, and by the evident warmth the biographer feels for his subject, this despite his recognition of Coetzee's emotional “stringiness”.

Kannemeyer strives to remain dispassionate when it comes to the difficult relationship between Coetzee and his children, Nicholas and Gisela, and blankly gives us the facts of Nicholas's passing, and Gisela's deeply affecting strug-

gle with illness, but one does feel that this is finally none of our business. Nevertheless, these narratives have to be included in a biography patently written with the ambition that it should remain an essential account of Coetzee's life and work for many decades to come. It will remain that, and additionally provides a stately capstone to Kannemeyer's distinguished career – Sofianos is a lecturer in English Literature at UCT.

BOOK MARKS



SHARP SHARP
Ed Suter
Quivertree Publications

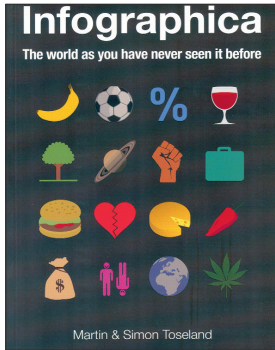
THIS IS the closest a book can come to a desirable toy you just want to have so that you have it.

Its shocking pink and yellow cover looks like loaded candy, and *Sharp Sharp* is a bling anomaly. It is both addictive and illustrative; aesthetic and sharply sensible to a culture that is not “sub”, and yet is often overlooked.

Interspersed with colourful pictures of sartorial flair dappled cityscapes and hand-painted signage, are quotes.

This book, on every front, is a homage to a gritty, happy, anti-twee South Africa.

– Karin Schimke

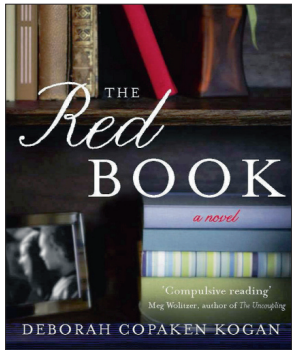


INFORGRAPHICA - THE WORLD AS YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE
Martin and Simon Toseland
Quercus

THIS is an utterly amazing book – in the sense that something in it amazes you on every page. It makes you laugh (What does “woof-woof” sounds like in Russian? “Gav-gav”, of course). And worry. And nod. And smile.

Visually and intellectually stimulating – each double spread contains some words and lots of illustrations or graphics – with a high score on entertainment value, I can't imagine who wouldn't get glued to its pages.

– Karin Schimke



THE RED BOOK
Deborah Kogan
Voice

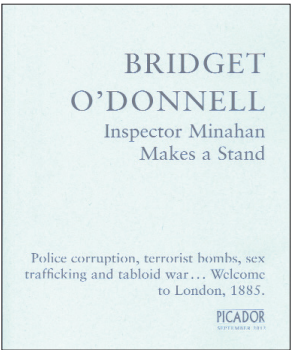
REVERSALS of fortune and the conceit and deceit of self-presentation are in the petri dish in Kogan's third novel.

The titular red book is a Harvard class report with brief autobiographical overviews written by alumni. Using these entries as the skeleton, Kogan fleshes it out through four women who come together for their 20-year class reunion.

The juxtaposition of these exposes a universal dilemma: When does Photoshopping the truth become an outright lie?

Kogan's writing is pleasantly spirited, but the elitism can fray.

– Aly Verbaan



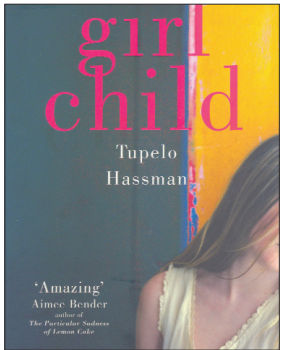
INSPECTOR MINAHAN MAKES A STAND
Bridget O'Donnell
Picador

PRUDERY and modesty spring to mind when thinking about Victorian England. Yet the shadow side loomed large.

O'Donnell lays bare the sadism of respected men of the day, including King Leopold II of Belgium and the soon-to-be Edward VII, known as “Dirty Bertie”. Wealthy men with a taste for (very) young flesh, serial child molesters and those seeking virgins of either sex to “cure” themselves of syphilis (ring any bells?) spring to life.

This non-fiction is a fascinating read based on painstaking research.

– Maya Fowler

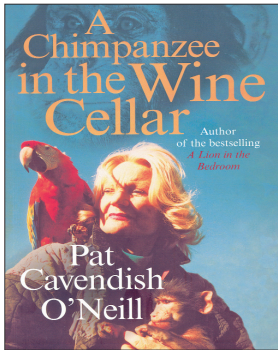


GIRL CHILD
Tupelo Hassman
Quercus

EDGY, fresh and unusual, and despite the writing being a little too slick at times, this is an up-beat story about the first 15 years in the life of a kid who has had no breaks in life. When she tells of her grandmother's abortion at 13, her mother's four children by 21 and her own abuse, one empathises with her as her spirit just soars.

Hassman has interwoven the Supreme Court ruling about sterilisation for the feeble-minded by introducing the child at the centre of the case. It's a celebration of life at its rawest.

– Shirley de Kock Gueller



A CHIMPANZEE IN THE WINE CELLAR
Pat Cavendish O'Neill
Jonathan Ball

IF YOU like horse racing, high society and people with so much money, they do whatever they please, this is the book for you.

This was the life of Countess Pat Cavendish O'Neill, heiress and daughter of a woman once adjudged the most beautiful in Europe.

Bed-hopping and royalty name-dropping abounds.

From Broadlands near Cape Town, Pat trained up South Africa's finest racing stock and enthralled the Turf Club by bringing a baboon to tea.

– Don Pinnock

diary

Wordsworth Books, Gardens Centre
Sunil Shah will launch his novel, *White Man's Numbers*, on Wednesday at 5.30 for 6pm. He will be in conversation with Diane Cassere. *Wordsworth Books, Shop 9, Gardens Centre, Mill Street, Gardens. RSVP by Monday to gardens@wordsworth.co.za or 021 461 864.*

The Book Lounge
Cambridge University Press will launch *Slave Emancipation and Racial Attitudes in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* by RL Watson, professor emeritus of history; North Carolina Wesleyan College, on Thursday at 5.30 for 6pm. The guest speaker is Nigel Worden, professor of history and head of the historical studies department, University of Cape Town. *Book Lounge, 71 Roeland Street, Cape Town. To RSVP e-mail booklounge@gmail.com, or call 021 462 2425.*

Exclusive Books
Don't miss the launch of *MasterChef South Africa: The Cookbook* on Thursday at 5.30 for 6pm. Errieda du Toit will be in discussion with judge Pete Goffe-Wood and contestants Sue-Ann Allen, Ilse Fourie, Sarel Loots and Lungile Nhlanhla. *Exclusive Books Tyger Valley, Shop G55, Tyger Valley Shopping Centre, Willie van Schoor Drive, Bellville. RSVP to 021 914 9910/2 or e-mail tygervalley@exclusivebooks.co.za*

Parow Library book sale
The Friends of Parow Library are hosting a sale of English, Afrikaans, fiction and non-fiction books until next Saturday. *Parow Library, cnr McIntyre Drive and 1st Avenue, Parow. Call 021 444 0940/41.*

Well Read Books sale at Cape Quarter
The Cape Quarter will host two giant fund-raising book and craft sales in aid of HIV/Aids NGO Wola Nani in December. The first will run from Thursday to Saturday next week and the second from Thursday, December 13, to Saturday, December 15. The sales will take place in the Village Market events area from 10am to 7pm. For further enquiries, or to donate books, CDs and DVDs, call Mark on 083 342 2261, 021 424 0497 or e-mail mark@wellread-books.com

Give-away
One of Quivertree Publications' finest offerings this year is *Remarkable Gardens of South Africa*. With excellent photographs by Craig Fraser and engaging text by Nini Bairnsfather Cloete, the book is a treasure trove of some of South Africa's best gardens – most normally hidden from view – from the carefully landscaped to those left to their own free-spirited devices, and the majesty of the Cape Floral Kingdom to the Little Karoo and the Drakensberg. **● We have one copy of Remarkable Gardens of South Africa, valued at R650, to give away, courtesy of Quivertree Publications. To enter SMS "Gardens" and your name to 34445 between 8am and 8pm today.**

Give-away for children
Tafelberg has just published a book aimed at six- to nine-year-olds, which is sure to pique their interest in vegetable gardening. *Roots, Shoots & Muddy Boots* by Samantha van Riet will teach them how to plan a garden; prepare the soil; plant, prune and harvest; and enjoy their own healthy vegetables, herbs and salad. She's included craft projects linked to gardening and easy recipes using the fresh produce they have grown. Each vegetable is shown on a double-page spread. This may be the way to get them to eat their veges. **● We have five copies of Roots, Shoots & Muddy Boots to give away. To enter SMS "Roots" and your name to 34445 between 8am and 8pm today.**

Winner!
Phyllis Webb of Diep River won last week's competition – a copy of Annie Bell's *Baking Bible* published by Jacana Media.

What I'm reading

RENEILWE MALATJI trained as a teacher and worked as a subject specialist and advisor to provincial education departments. She has recently completed a post-graduate diploma in journalism and an MA in creative writing at Rhodes University. She is working on a doctorate at Rhodes. She is the author of *Love Interrupted*, her first book.



I always read several books at the same time. The one I focus on the most depends on my mood and stays in my handbag all the time. *Dark Continent My Black Arse* by Sihle Khumalo is in my bag at the moment. The book is about Khumalo's adventures when he did the Cape-to-Cairo road trip. This book is in my system because I have an upcoming road trip during which I plan to explore East African countries, like Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and Mozambique, in the same way in January. The more I read this book, the more I am able to visualise and experience my trip beforehand. *Sometimes There Is a Void* by talented author Zakes Mda,

and *Gone With The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, are next to my bed. Mda serves as a source of inspiration for the creative non-fiction book that I am writing. Whenever I feel insipid, I take out this memoir and read it. Reading this book always makes me want to write, write and write. *Gone with the Wind* is my old-time favourite. I have a similar story in my head that I am yet to write.

Then there is *My Father, My Monster* by McIntosh Polela and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy on my living-room table. Reading these books is an emotional exercise. Whenever I feel touchy and down, I grab one, sink into it and cry a lot. Then suddenly my life no longer feels that dreadful.