

# Chilling insights into a sick society

IN THE HEART OF THE WHORE by Jacques Pauw.  
(Southern Book Publishers, Half-way House.)

THE ANALOGY of the whore — a degraded and depersonalised victim of society — is, in many respects, an appropriate one for apartheid's death squads. It is, however, not their bodies but their very humanity that these dealers in death prostitute. This book by *Vrye Weekblad* assistant editor Jacques Pauw tells the compelling story of these squads and, in the process, provides penetrating — and chilling — insights into the nature of our sick society.

It is a journey into our very own heart of darkness.

The book opens with a familiar enough South African scene: Braai fires at sunset on a river bank. It is, however, a braaivleis with a difference, for as those assembled eat, drink and are merry, the bodies of two men who have just been cold-bloodedly 'eliminated' slowly burn to cinders on their nearby pyre. The story then moves to a different setting with a graphic description of the brutal assassination of lawyer Griffiths Mxenge, the subsequent shooting of his wife Victoria, and the cover ups which accompanied these murders.

The ensuing chapters cover, in great detail, the stories of former security policeman Dirk Coetzee and some of his fellow hit men, the security structures of which they were part, and the events set in motion by their revelations, initially published in the *Vrye Weekblad*: The Government-appointed Harms Commission of Inquiry, and the ensuing defamation case brought by General Lothar Neethling against the newspaper, which finally vindicated Coetzee and those journalists who had dared, at enormous risk, to publish the truth.

IT IS not a pretty story: It tells of the way in which the government waged a massive disinformation campaign

against opponents of apartheid, and of the devious means used to destroy them — at huge cost to the taxpayer — through subjecting them to various forms of harassment, torture and death. It describes the impunity with which cross-border attacks on activists were carried out in total disregard for the sovereignty of neighbouring states. It details, too, the deliberate destabilisation policy of the government, in its support of movements such as Renamo, and its manoeuvres to disrupt elections in Namibia.

The prevarications and blatant untruths of government ministers, and senior policemen, are laid bare. So too, is the way in which the judicial system of the country has been subverted, through drawing convicted criminals into police operations, and the way in which policemen themselves combined their political duties with illegal activities such as diamond and pornography smuggling and car theft.

This strategy was rationalised by ingrained beliefs about the legitimacy of the task, and was facilitated by unquestioning obedience to authority.

DEATH SQUADS operate in many countries, but it is the national disease of racism, which permeates our society, which gives the local version its unique character. With notable exceptions the victims are almost all black. It is inconceivable that so many whites could have been murdered, or simply disappeared, and nothing done (just as it is inconceivable that the euphemism unrest would have been applied if over 6 000 whites had died in political violence in Natal).

As a result of the separation caused by apartheid, the majority of whites have neither known, nor even wanted to know, the realities of black life in this country. The central message of this book is about the frightening con-

sequences of grossly distorted power relationships, and of the accompanying secrecy and lack of accountability on the part of such a government, and as such holds important lessons for the future.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope: The book points to the way in which whites can be transformed through encounters with 'the enemy', and the reconciliation which is still possible. Dirk Coetzee, e.g. learns that ANC members are not the ogres he had been led to believe, and accept him in spite of what he has done.

It also highlights the important role of both good investigative journalism and the courts in ensuring that justice is done.

THERE IS still a very long way to go. The legacies of the past, Dr Van Zyl Slabbert warns us in the Foreword to this book, must be recognised and transformed if a new start is to be made. The recognition has been but grudging and partial, and there is little sign that the necessary transformation process is taking place. The murderers and perjurers have still not had to face the consequences of their deeds. The 'country's madness', as Pauw calls it, is still upon us. The credibility of the police must be restored: Unless the perpetrators of the ongoing violence are arrested and brought to book, the transition our society makes will, to use Slabbert's words, be a 'gearshift into madness'.

That gearshift must be avoided at all costs. This book is a timeless warning about the dangers of not knowing, and not wanting to know. It presents an opportunity to know.

Its greatest strength — the painstaking documentation and attention to detail — is also its major weakness for a non-academic readership. Better, however, to read even parts of it than nothing.

— MARY DE HAAS

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surely to bow to the continued tyranny of the minority which we have had for 300 years. So either way we will have a tyranny. Is it perhaps the 'majority' rather than the 'tyranny' that is to be feared?

The 'tyranny of the majority' as John Stuart Mill noted (approvingly) was feared by 'thinkers' and the 'important classes'. (In South African parlance, I presume, that would mean 'whites'.)

Mill also believed that there were 'exceptional individuals who instead of being deterred, should be encouraged to act differently from the mass'. Again, in the South African context, that doubtless means 'whites'. The proponents of 'minority rights' seem to be claiming not equal but more rights for the minority than for the majority.

The new-found concern for minority rights seems to me to be a thinly veiled attempt to protect white privilege on the

rather spurious basis of individual human rights. But neither one's individuality nor one's minority status can be the basis for human rights. They are both factors which separate one from other people, whereas human rights are based on what we all have in common, our humanity.

Nobody can enjoy them fully unless everybody does; and no individuals or groups can arrogate some to themselves. ●