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Haunting tale of a land about which not many novels have been written

● **Complex and prescient story weaves together dust, bones and German genocide in Namibia**

Monique Verdryn

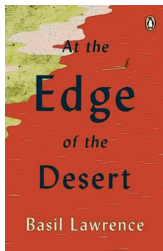
Decades before the Holocaust, German military forces, the Schutztruppe, committed a lesser-known genocide in what is now Namibia. Between 1904 and 1908, colonial soldiers imprisoned, abused and murdered tens of thousands of Herero and Nama people in the territory then known as South West Africa.

Through battle, starvation and thirst in the desert, and through forced labour, malnutrition, sexual violence, medical experiments and disease in concentration camps, about 80,000 indigenous people were killed.

The numbers are difficult to confirm, but this figure represents about 80% of the Herero people and 50% of the Nama. The goal of the army was to rid the colony of people viewed as expendable and thus gain access to their land.

Germany has historically refused to acknowledge its role in these atrocities – until now. More than 100 years after the violence occurred, the country has finally acknowledged that its actions constituted genocide.

Foreign minister Heiko Maas said in a May 28 statement that Germany plans to pay \$1.35bn towards infrastructure development in Namibia over the next three decades. However, the country refuses to offer direct reparations to the descendants



of genocide victims. This genocide lies at the heart of Basil Lawrence's novel *At the Edge of the Desert*.

Narrated from the point of view of Henry van Wyk, a Rehoboth Bastier (a Southern African ethnic group descended from white European men and Khoisan women), the novel opens with him going for a swim at the Shark Island pool. Once known as "Death Island", it was the site of one of five concentration camps off Lüderitz, in central Namibia.

Henry's knowledge of the genocide is slim. This is most likely because he and his sister Lucia lost their parents tragically at a young age and were raised by their "aunt", a German expat who was their parents' employer at the time. He was educated in private schools in SA and spent some years in Johannesburg.



Ghost town: A welcome sign at the abandoned Namibian town of Kolmannskoppe. /123RF/Micro1

An architecture graduate, he is now something of a failed documentary filmmaker, his one film being on the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd by Dimiri Tsafendas. The docc is he has not exactly been a great success and he is mortified when his sister's British friends ask to watch it.

This is a novel with multiple strands and a large cast. Henry fills his time – and makes a meagre living – by being a wedding videographer. He is also working on a second documentary, about SA's notorious Numbers gangs – prison gangs made up of groups

known as the 26s, 27s and 28s. An engaging character in the novel is Dollar, a colonel in the 28s. Henry spends much of his time transcribing and editing his interviews with Dollar, who describes in detail the imaginary uniforms that gang members wear according to their rank.

Initially it had been my intention to ask the men about life as a gang member, but I'd shifted my focus when they began telling me about their uniforms, Henry says. Dollar wears a blue overall jacket and army trousers with his first interview, but to Henry he says: "I wear the red coat with

10 gold buttons... and the black collar and the black sleeve. There is gold around that black."

He tells Henry he has four stars because he is a colonel, and he has a white helmet with the gold badge, grasping the air above his head to indicate the invisible badge. A subplot focuses on the British couple Will and Amanda, who have escaped London to "find themselves" in Namibia. Will is a modern-day cult leader who seeks to set up a community called Harmony on the outskirts of Lüderitz. Will, a disciple of the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier, is a

mutter with a desire for power and he has no qualms taking advantage of the people around him, many of whom have few prospects in life, as he sets out building his vapid fantasy.

"To put it bluntly," he rails, "society should do all it can to encourage us to make money and fuck. That is my law of passion attraction. It comes as no surprise to you that I believe civilisation limits and frustrates our desires. That's why a man bombs the Place de la République and the Colonne de Juillet and the others. Civilisation profits from unhappiness. Civilisation is founded

on poverty and destitution and disenfranchisement. Built on the root of all evil: frustration."

Will and Amanda, who quickly develop a reputation for not paying people for work done, rope Henry in to film the development of Harmony and the motivation behind it. But Henry soon becomes hostile to them and is astounded that Will is having an affair with his beloved sister Lucia, who is one of the most likable people in a tale filled with questionable characters.

It is through his lawyer cousin Chesney, the son of his aunt who refused to take Henry and Lucia in after their parents' death, that Henry is introduced to the realities of the genocide. Chesney ropes him in to interview the descendants of the victims, to place on record the stories that have been handed down from generation to generation, and to use these testimonies as part of a class-action suit against the German government.

Chesney warns an almost apathetic Henry to exercise caution: "As I say, the Namibian government isn't exactly supportive of our claim. They'll do anything to make it go away. They don't want to alienate German Namibians living here, or Germany itself. We're the largest African recipient of German development aid. Consider what that means. Plus they send us 100,000 tourists who spend millions of euros every year. Our politicians are concerned that money will be used as a bargaining chip, or as punishment."

Lawrence's tale is a complex and prescient one, given that the Namibian government has just halted Germany's admission

and the country's commitment to hand over to it millions of euros. The Herero and Nama leaders, meanwhile, have dismissed the deal as a public relations coup because it does not include reparations to the descendants.

The author's skill lies in elegantly weaving together the many strands of his insights into a country about which not many novels have been written. His writing is often lyrical, and we are given glimpses into the stark beauty of the ghost towns of Kolmannskoppe and Elizabeth Bay.

REDEMPTION

Henry, who often comes across as a despondent anti-hero, is finally given his chance at redemption when he discovers femurs, tibias and skulls, "like scattered lotsam after a terrible wreck", lying undisturbed in a valley.

Thousands of bones on the sand. Tens of thousands of human bones. Until now, I'd only read about the parched, shallow pool of death. It was silent and unforgetting, and only visible because the Namib allowed the valley to exist. I crouched to get a better look at fragments of cloth scattered among the remains. Some of it was white, possibly lace. There was black bombazine and hessian. Buttons, smooth as pearl, and tarnished belt buckles along with a detachable gentleman's dress collar. Thick shoe-leather with eyelets still holding firm. Fingers – forgotten and eroded by the wind – once touched these possessions. That simple thought defeated me, and I raised my camera to begin again."

BOOK REVIEW

Overstuffed prose makes Joburg novel unlikely to create a frisson of limerence

John Fraser

I am not sure I would choose this title for a novel of mine, not that there is any.

"Limerence" is not a word I have used, and even after reading Vincent Pienaar's lightweight take, it will not colour my discourse in the foreseeable future.

To save you looking it up, in the rather likely event that you haven't a clue what it means, a Google search informed me that "limerence is a state of mind which results from a romantic attraction to another person and typically includes obsessive thoughts and fantasies and a desire to form or maintain a relationship with the object of love and have one's feelings reciprocated". Got it?

Set mainly in Joburg, the tale centres on Scout, an apparently likable chap who beds five very different but all hot women, each of whom is or becomes far more successful financially than he ever will.

We are told, well into the tale, that he is "a man so charming, so amusing, so smooth, that he becomes lovable, and then you become so attached to 'lovable' that you forget about rogue". As well as indulging in a considerable amount of bed-hopping, Scout wears a Panama hat a lot, but for a while wears a flat cap. He drinks and smokes a lot, and for much of the time hangs around bars in Melville, where his checky, chappy manner endears him to the



parade of eccentrics who also frequent the suburb.

The plot revolves on a fundraising con, linked to an act of brutality, but it would be difficult to say a lot more about this without giving away elements of the plot. It is written with a light touch, but I was irritated by the desperate attempts by the author to be ever so witty almost throughout the whole time.

Take this overstuffed prose relating to a vehicle repair: "It was not too difficult to replace and, most importantly, it didn't cost too much money, but it was in such an inaccessible part of the engine, even

determined Crusaders in search of the Holy Grail would have been reluctant to take on the search."

There is a lot of inflated language like this, which may explain why I put down the book for several weeks, having tackled only a few dozen pages. Had I not been committed to writing this review, it would have stayed put down.

In defence of *Limerence* (the book, not the emotion) it did pick up the pace, and for a while, it became almost interesting. However, the arrival towards the end of yet another hot female character

enabled me to guess the ending long before my marathon read had ended, which was a bit of a let-down.

In fairness to the author, there is a cleverness to the plot, in the same way as *Mamma Mia* gives the audience a thread with which to link several classic Abba songs to a storyline. And a big improvement here on *Mamma Mia* is that there is no singing by Pierce Brosnan.

It is fun to be taken along to places where I have actually been in Joburg, and Melville comes to life quite well.

However, I cannot forgive how the narrative is sabotaged by the author, who darts to and fro between different narrators, also chopping and changing between different periods, in a way that not only disrupts the flow but that also annoyed the

hell out of me. While this is not a hell I would recommend, I was sufficiently impressed by the structure of the plot, the Joburg locations, the slightly more than one-dimensional characters, to see the potential of this story being dramatised for the small screen.

Certainly, SA has some world-beating talent and can produce brilliant TV drama. Take *Die Bokklub*, which has just helped fund the work on *Showmax*.

REFRESHING

The same eccentricities in character that just don't do it for me on the page of *Limerence* might work if dramatised with the right scripts, cast and director on the small screen. I would even be prepared to suggest to my good chums in the department of trade, industry & competition that we throw a bit of public money into the production.

It's a pity I felt so little limerence for *Limerence*. Maybe there is a more hands-on editor (I also spotted a few occasions where the proofreader was dozing), it might have been a better book.

However, it is refreshing to see this sort of fiction coming out of SA, crafted with a lighter touch, and there were some enjoyable elements – even though it will never be my desert island selection.

Limerence, then, was not the read of a lifetime. But at least I learnt a new word.

STREAMING

Your Netflix habit has a carbon footprint but not a big one

Kelly Gilblom
Los Angeles

Streaming your favourite hour-long television show is the environmental equivalent of boiling a kettle for six minutes or popping four bags of popcorn in the microwave, according to an industry-backed study from climate group Carbon Trust.

The findings are encouraging to researchers – and good news for streamers such as Netflix, which helped fund the work – because they show the carbon footprint of streaming is smaller than some estimates in the past showed. The study also showed ways in which entertainment companies can cut emissions their products generate.

Like most industries, the film and television business is on a mad dash to cut carbon dioxide output, hoping to help mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

While streaming a show has less of an effect on the environment than, say, the production of a new movie, companies are looking for any way they can to improve sustainability.

"There was a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about the carbon impact of video streaming," said Andie Stephens, lead author of the white paper and associate director at the Carbon Trust. "We therefore wanted to put this into perspective, and help to increase the knowledge and understanding of the impact of video streaming."

The research found an hour of streaming emits the equivalent of about 55g of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, based on a user in Europe. About half the emissions come from the device used itself, with larger and older technology harming the environment the most. The remaining emissions stem from home web routers and distribution networks – with a small volume coming from data centres, the centralised hubs where internet information is processed and stored.

HIGH DEFINITION

Researchers behind the white paper also examined whether watching content in high definition had a greater effect on emissions than standard definition. They found it makes little difference. Further, the sustainability of the business has been improving. While demand for streaming has soared, especially during the pandemic, the amount of energy consumed by those activities has fallen as equipment becomes more efficient and green power rises in popularity.

A group called Dimpact –

comprising media companies and researchers from the UK's University of Bristol – has been trying to gain a clearer picture of how bad streaming is for the environment by creating a carbon calculator. Using the tool, Netflix said about an hour of streaming emitted less than 100g of carbon dioxide equivalent, similar to the latest findings. The new report is a "validation of the work that we had done", said Emma Stewart, the head of sustainability at Netflix.

Separately, Netflix plans to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by the end of 2022, a target that means it will offset all the emissions it cannot eliminate by that time. About 50% of Netflix's emissions come from the physical production of new content, and 45% stems from corporate operations.

The company doesn't include its customers' web use in the calculation of its carbon footprint, though Stewart said they can encourage partners to make cleaner devices and customers to switch to green tariffs, which add more renewable power to the grid. /Bloomberg



Carbon buildup: A study shows video streaming has a smaller effect than previously estimated. /123RF