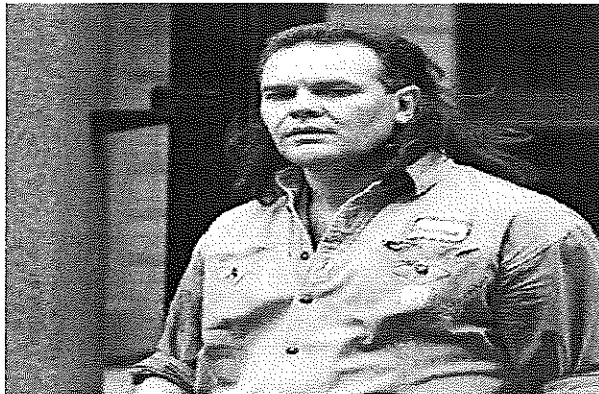


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## Let's get real, shall we?

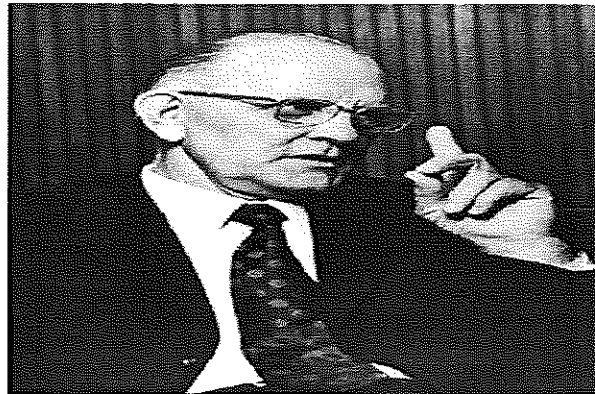
Oct 25, 2009 12:50 AM| By

**Two new SA novels would do well to own up and face the facts, writes Tymon Smith. Little Ice Cream Boy - Jacques Pauw, Penguin SA, R190 - The Tall Assassin - Alan D Elsdon, Umuzi, R200**



THE TRUTH HURTS: Ferdi Barnard, left; 'Lang Hendrik' van den Bergh, right

*Photograph by:*



*Photograph by:*

Fiction and reality are obviously related - we use the experience of one to make sense of the other, twisting material from everyday life into the fantastic. But two new books about the dark side of South Africa's past raise questions about whether reality is sometimes so fantastic that it just cannot be turned into fiction.

Take the story of Ferdi Barnard, the son of a security policeman who became a gangster and an apartheid assassin - the man who pulled the trigger of the gun that killed David Webster outside his Troyeville home on May Day in 1989. No one knows Barnard's story better than Jacques Pauw, who has over the course of his long career as a journalist made the subject of apartheid killers and lowlifes his speciality - from his work with Max du Preez at Vrye Weekblad to his documentaries for Special Assignment and his three books of non-fiction: *The Heart of the Whore*, *Into the Heart of Darkness* and *Dances with Devils*.

It was to Pauw that Barnard, sucking on a crack pipe in his car, confessed to the Webster assassination and it was Pauw who testified against him, helping send him to Pretoria Maximum Security Prison where he still sits.

Pauw has openly admitted that his first novel, *Little Ice Cream Boy*, is a thinly fictionalised account of the towering and notorious Barnard and his diamond-smuggling gangster friends from Randfontein. Written in the first person from the perspective of "Gideon Goosen", the novel is a gripping and dark investigation into one man's journey from apartheid West Rand life to the

bowels of the Johannesburg underworld - at times it's difficult to read, but it's convincing in its portrayal of the psychology of Barnard and the world that made him.

So why is this a novel and not a biography - why pretend when anyone who knows about Barnard, or is familiar with Pauw's other books, would also know that all this has actually happened? Because Barnard wants to write his own story once he knows that it will not jeopardise his chances of parole.

So, perhaps not wanting to piss off a man who's not known for his diplomatic skills, Pauw has chosen to tell Barnard's story without incurring the possibilities of libel suits or directly jeopardising parole applications.

While the central character is well realised and fulfils the demands of fictional narrative, the too-obvious relationship between the source material and the final product places *Little Ice Cream Boy* in an uncomfortable limbo between narrative non-fiction and a pop version of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, proving that the truth can be more unbelievable than anything imaginable.

In a similar vein, but without any of Pauw's writing ability, is Alan D Elsdon's *The Tall Assassin*, the "based on facts" story of intelligence boogeyman "Lang Hendrik" van den Bergh, a member of the Nazi-sympathising *Ossewabrandwag*, fellow detainee of Balthazar Johannes Vorster at the Koffiefontein Camp during World War II, and later founder of the Bureau of State Security.

A former security policeman turned private investigator, Elsdon writes like a retired civil servant exercising his creative side - unwieldy adjectives, too much attention to odd details and far too many paragraphs of potted history that point to the book's evident desire to be a work of non-fiction.

If there is a reason for writing this book as fiction it can't be for fear of repercussion from its subject; the tall man died in 1997 and most of his associates are dead, in prison or trying to live quietly in corners and not draw attention to themselves. It must be a lack of substantive documents and evidence.

*The Tall Assassin* proves that making thinly disguised fiction from fact is just an easy way out of doing the research required to bring an unbelievable, but true, story to life .