



# Violence with a thoughtful back story

Researching Flaming June helped Amanda Coetzee understand how cults brainwash their members, writes Sue Grant-Marshall

**A**MANDA Coetzee is a study in contrasts. She is a school deputy principal by day and kills off characters in her thriller novels at night. She lives in crime-infested SA, yet sets her books in the green, sleepy countryside of England.

She has created in her hero, Harry O'Connor, a dark, enigmatic police detective who is also an Irish Traveller — some call them Gypsies — and they are not particularly noted for adhering to the law in England.

Coetzee had already written two of her books about the detective, known as Badger to his Traveller family, when an ageing aunt told the stunned author about her own Roma family background.

“My great-grandmother was a Romani Gypsy, yet I had not an inkling of this and had created Badger without any outside influence while living here in Rustenburg,” says Coetzee in her lively British accent that dances with energy.

She has come to Joburg during her school holidays, a time the industrious teacher and mother devotes to writing and promoting her books. She has been particularly busy at the latter this year, for SA has suddenly woken up to the Badger books.

The third in her series, Flaming June (Pan Macmillan), is set in a cult that lives in an ancient British mansion in Bedfordshire, the county where the author was born and raised.

When a lovely young woman, clad in a diaphanous gown, is found drowned with a footprint-shaped bruise on her back, Badger is assigned to head up the team to catch the killer.

The search soon narrows to the mysterious Connect Healing and Wellness Retreat, where troubled young souls, mainly women, are rehabilitated.

This is carried out under the strict, cloying surveillance of the Woodmore twins — the exquisite Isabel, known as Moon Mother, and the muscular Alexander, or Dragon Brother. So concerned are they for the welfare of young women with agonised minds that they send their acolytes to hospitals to befriend the patients and encourage them to join their organic cult.

When another woman dies at the retreat, Badger sends in an undercover cop, one of his top



TRAVELLER: Amanda Coetzee soon found out that she also has a Gypsy heritage. Picture: MARTIN RHODES

policewomen. After contact with her is broken, the hunt for the killer is truly on.

It is as much a battle of the mind as it is a physical one, hence Flaming June's cover line, “not all prisons have locks”.

Coetzee has themes of self-identity running through her three Badger books, all of them racy reads with riveting plots.

The first, Bad Blood, concerns child murders and conflicted self-image; the second,

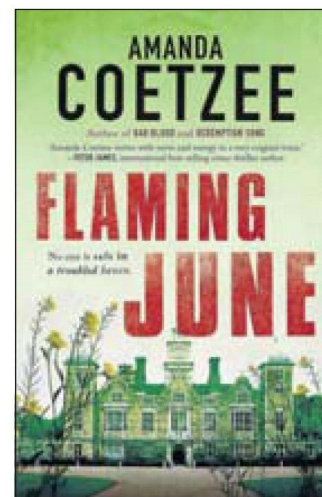
Redemption Song, is about women and child trafficking; this latest book deals with cults.

“I have been fascinated for a long time about why people get subverted from who they are. I found this particular cult attractive with its ideas of saving the world, eating only what they grow and sacrificing themselves for future generations.”

Her research for Flaming June was intensive and included studying brainwashing and

torture at Guantanamo Bay. She also examined the methods some cults employ to entrap their members with constant meditation and confession circles, as well as mental and physical exhaustion.

At one stage when she was doing research on the internet, Coetzee realised how easy it would be for a lonely, confused person to be drawn into a cult. “You're constantly urged to ‘click now, click now’ for a



trained counsellor. I didn't click because, even with my strong mind and settled existence, it was so repetitive and hypnotic that it made me nervous.”

Coetzee leans forward: “The cult is everything that Badger hates including the sharing of self, because he's a secretive soul. And he's shocked at the cult's transparent clothing — meant to infer that they had nothing to hide.”

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Coetzee has created a powerful yet complex character in Badger, who is intensely loyal, never promiscuous and sticks to his word. He was abandoned by his mother at the age of eight and raised by Irish Travellers, who gave him his name, “because wild badgers never back down”.

He becomes a bare-knuckle boxer and, in an act of rebellion, severs all ties with his clan before joining London's Metropolitan Police Service as an undercover operative. To his dismay, the police dispatch him to his clan to find an abducted Traveller child and he ends up back there with his “family”, to which he becomes intensely devoted.

Part of Badger is modelled on Coetzee's banker husband, Nick, whom she met in Mahikeng on a trip to SA. In marrying him, she has left behind a huge family in Bedford:

“My grandmother is one of 16, my mother one of eight and I have six siblings. When we go to weddings we go in buses!”

She has chosen to site her books in England “because the crime here is so violent that I couldn't compete with it. It's scary because it is so real to so many people in SA. I don't feel I'd be competent enough to answer some of the burning questions about it, having only lived here since 1995.”

Her books are redolent of English psychological thriller author Ruth Rendell, with well-developed characters because she doesn't like concentrating purely on violence.

“It's not enough for me that someone's face was peeled off. I want to know how and why it was done, to infiltrate the mind of the perpetrator in an effort to understand someone who does the unforgivable.”

She does this in Redemption Song, when Badger travels to Albania to rescue a trafficked British mother and daughter from the sinister brutality of a warlord.

Coetzee does not pull her punches, however. The violence twists your gut because the well-constructed characters are living in your head.

“The kids at school don't think I'm going to murder or brainwash them, but they know I'm serious about ‘consequences for choices’, whether that applies to laws or school rules. They need to learn that you will pay for what you have done wrong. I think my being a crime author helps to explain that.”

She hopes her novels tell kids “that it's okay to write. We agree that science and maths are critical skills but we're constantly battling with the idea that reading is not equally so.”

Her pupils learn that it took 20 years of “not giving up” before her first book was published, and that dreams take hard work.

Coetzee is not sure if the Badger series will continue — even though she is already working on a fourth book, about a sniper who has returned from Afghanistan.

It will kill me if the Badger tales don't continue to flow from this engrossing writer, who has now been discovered by the French. Storytelling flows freely in her Romani veins — blood will out.

