

**The Third Reel**  
★★★★★  
SJ Naudé  
Umuzi, R250

## REELING INTO A DANSE MACABRE

SJ Naudé's dark novel establishes the literary voice of a career-change lawyer, writes **Michele Magwood**

In London in 1986 a young man awakes in a church bell tower. He has escaped conscription in South Africa and a bullying, homophobic father, and will be granted asylum in Thatcher's Britain. After a night of sex with the belleringer he is elated, reborn. "His body is a radar, his skin a new country, his heart a shiny machine."

So begins *The Third Reel*, the debut novel from SJ Naudé. Naudé seems to have sprung, fully formed, into the South African literary world. After decades as a corporate lawyer in London and New York – he holds masters degrees from Cambridge and Columbia – he hung up his suits and returned to South Africa to study a creative writing masters degree with Marlene van Niekerk in Stellenbosch.

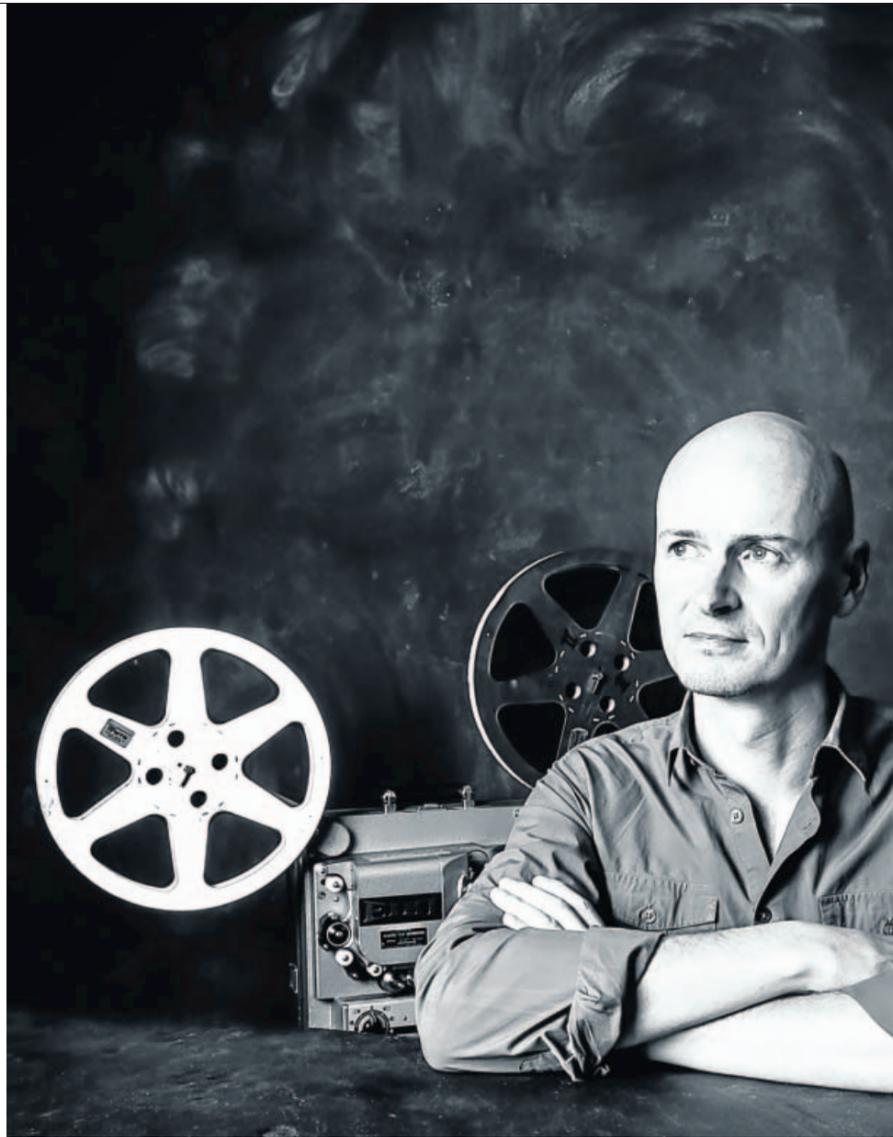
The result was a collection of short stories, *The Alphabet of Birds/Alfabet van die Vöels*, which was roundly applauded and which won several prizes, including the UJ Debut Prize and a South African Literary Award.

"The stories were written after many years of me suppressing the urge to write fiction while being a lawyer," he says. "They flowed remarkably freely – wrote themselves, almost."

*The Third Reel*, he says, was a far more laborious process. "In my experience the creative process feels like hacking at a thick layer of ice, until suddenly, when you least expect it, you break through. A few precious moments of fluency then follow, of epiphany or swooning, entailing something like the dissolution of the self, a loss of personality, almost, a hiatus in which the pen starts making its own patterns on the page."

Naudé is a slight, poised man, tightly composed, with the long fingers of a pianist. His bearing speaks of cool asceticism but his writing burns like dry ice.

Etienne, the South African refugee, is at first a spectral presence, virtually penniless, moving from squat to squat, leaving little mark on the world. He only begins to take shape when he falls in love with a German



The reels belong to a film lover who collects old 8mm and 16mm reels and projectors. © Joanne Olivier

artist, Axel. Axel, who has a huge tattoo of an oak tree on his back, moonlights as a paediatric nurse.

Etienne is awarded a scholarship to study at the London Film School. When he comes upon the first of three reels of a German film made by a small group of Jewish filmmakers in the 1930s, it ignites an obsession in him to find the remaining two.

**'A few precious moments of fluency then follow, of epiphany or swooning, entailing something like the dissolution of the self'**

The story becomes a quest wrapped in a mystery, especially when Axel disappears in Berlin and Etienne follows him.

Naudé layers the story with film, architecture, music and art, but there is nothing genteel about this: it is Brutalist architecture (one of Etienne's lovers gets aroused by concrete buildings), depressing wartime black and white films, shattering post-punk industrial music. And Axel's art

kicks hard at the boundaries of decency: his installations include a flask of fresh semen that he tops up every day, photographs of dead Victorian children, and figurines woven from the hair of dying babies, harvested from those on his wards.

Just as Axel roars at convention, so Etienne tries to obliterate himself, eradicate his past; he ignores the desperate letters from his mother in South Africa, screws up his studies, refuses to join the band of conscientious objectors working for the struggle.

Scenes are often erotic, sometimes depraved, both carnal and tender. The atmosphere is at times drenched in ennui, at others poundingly tense.

The writing is acutely sensory – Axel smells of "sweat and cordite" – and the themes of illness, madness, loss and alienation that Naudé explored in his short stories are unwound again, clinging fast to the narrative.

*The Third Reel* is a difficult, discomfiting book. But towards the end, when the quest is over, a state of grace finally descends. 📖

Available in Afrikaans as *Die Derde Spoel*.

### Book Bites

#### BOOK MYSTERY

**Dying to Live** ★★★★★  
Michael Stanley  
Orenda Books, R195



When a witchdoctor goes missing and a body is discovered in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, detectives David "Kubu" Bengu and Samantha Khama are called in to solve another head-scratcher of a case.

While the police try to piece it all together, a group of malefactors continue their quest for a plant that will increase one's longevity.

Themes of rhino-horn smuggling, biopiracy, corruption and greed permeate Michael Stanley's sixth crime novel, while the beautiful setting of Botswana captures the imagination. Kubu is an endearing protagonist both as a detective and a dad, devoted to his family. This is a crime story with a generous dose of tenderness. 📖

Anna Stroud @annawriter\_

#### BOOK BUFF

**A Piece of the World** ★★★★★  
Christina Baker Kline  
HarperCollins, R290



An historical fictionalised account about the life of Christina Olson, the woman in Andrew Wyeth's famous 1948 painting *Christina's World*. Olson, who lived in the Maine farmhouse in the painting, suffered from a debilitating neuromuscular disease and the book describes her determination to live life as full as possible despite this. Olson's life straddled two world wars and one ancestor who was a judge in the Salem witch trials. Through the Wyeth painting, now in the Museum of Modern Art, she transcended the piece of New England where she felt trapped. An enjoyable read. 📖

Vuyo Mzini @vuyomzini

#### BOOK THRILL

**Spire** ★★★★★  
Fiona Snickers  
Clockwork Books, R230

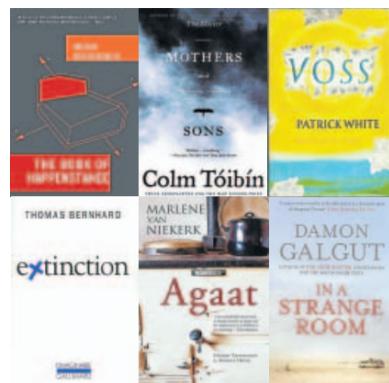


In remote Antarctica, the South Pole International Research Establishment houses a frozen box of viruses. Dr Candice Burchell, surgeon and virologist, is called to the infirmary after an employee falls fatally ill. The centre is ravaged by an outbreak of diseases that haven't been dealt with since the Middle Ages. More people turn up dead. Dr Burchell is about to be left all alone – or is she? Snickers' novel drops a stone into the pit of your stomach. 📖 Kelly Ansara @QueenKelso

### Naudé's Best Books

This is a somewhat random selection of contemporary books that were exactly the right read at the right time for me, and hence made maximum impact (rather than necessarily a 'best novel' list):

- **The Book of Happenstance, Ingrid Winterbach:** Invoking a cosmic scale to measure human losses provides unexpected consolation.
- **Mothers and Sons, Colm Tóibín:** Sober explorations of mother-son relationships in deceptively simple stories.



- **Extinction, Thomas Bernhard:** How the rhythms of seething anger can make for unexpected beauty!
- **Voss, Patrick White:** Extraordinary visions in the Australian Outback, a journey into the void.
- **Agaat, Marlene van Niekerk:** Proof of how a novel can overwhelm and forever change a reader.
- **In a Strange Room, Damon Galgut:** Sparsely written and deeply affecting book about travelling, memory and the inescapable self. 📖