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*A Beautiful Place to Die* is Malla Nunn’s first novel. A detective novel with all the usual elements, it manages to transcend the formulas without breaking the mould.

Emmanuel Cooper has fought in World War Two and returned to his native South Africa to join the police force. It’s 1952, and he is sent to investigate the murder of an Afrikaner police captain in a small town. Battling against the entrenched prejudices of the white elite – powerfully embodied in the police captain’s five sons, their genteel, domineering mother, and the police Security Branch – Cooper barely manages to solve the crime and escape with his life.

What sets this apart from other crime novels is the depth of Nunn’s characterisations. Emmanuel Cooper himself is a tormented soul, haunted by voices from a past we only gradually discover. Although there is an abundance of thugs, most of them Boers, Nunn manages to differentiate them: the senior security officer is a clever, sadistic professional thug, while his assistant is, perhaps inevitably, more of a bonehead. Four of the five brothers are also musclebound, violent and self-righteous, while the youngest is a deeply troubled teenager with a god complex and a mother fixation.

Cooper’s only friends in this town are a black police constable, a coloured girl and a Jewish doctor who, mysteriously, runs a general store and practises medicine in secret. In this era when the National Party has recently come to power and enacted the laws upon which South Africa’s brutal apartheid system is based, these are not powerful allies. Zweigman, the Jewish doctor, is beautifully drawn – clever, dry and
enigmatic. Shabalala, the black constable, is perhaps a little weaker: his unassailable dignity and wisdom make him a slightly wooden character, but he is not devoid of complexity and his bond with the white supremicist police captain who has been murdered is intriguing. What Cooper discovers about the captain himself is surprising but believable.

This town in rural South Africa may be a beautiful place to die, but it’s an ugly place to live: the society is repellent – those in power are self-deceiving and vain, those without power crushed and demoralised. The feeling of relief and satisfaction which usually comes at the end of a detective novel is very slight in this book: the weight of history is heavy upon all the characters, and no resolution is going to be satisfactory in this time and place. Despite this – or perhaps because of this – *A Beautiful Place to Die* is an extraordinarily powerful novel, more moving and upsetting than anything I have read in the genre.

The cover implies that this book is the beginning of a series, with its tag ‘Introducing Detective Emmanual Cooper’. It’s hard to imagine the author being able to continue in quite this vein with this character. It has been difficult enough for her to pull an honest cop through this morass, and the situation is only going to get worse for the next forty years. Nunn would be better off exploring new avenues for her outstanding talent rather than getting this poor guy beaten to a pulp by a string of self-righteous thugs in a sequence of pale imitations of this magnificent book.