

Out of a Southern African Furnace

Thomas Bagot

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Out of a Southern African Furnace is a technical thriller, with an emphasis placed on the technical part. While author Dr. Thomas Bagot does not overuse technical jargon, much of the suspense of his book is procedural. Can a consulting technical expert who is up against time constraints, hostile colleagues, and scheming corporate interests succeed?

The story is set in a remote part of Southern Africa and opens with Ben de Bruin in his car, injured and nearly unconscious. The book begins with violence and danger before proceeding into the story of the events that lead to de Bruin's accident.

De Bruin is part of a South African family with mining interests. His relatives can't understand why the family business seems to have gone awry. What they don't know is that the corporate power brokers involved want the business to fail, so they can profit from its resurrection. The de Bruins suspect foul play, but they are not sure what is going on. They call on Peter Connor, an engineer, to conduct an independent investigation. Meanwhile, the corporate interests have brought in their own consultant, Rebecca Roslynn. Roslynn is an international management consultant and engineering expert charged with making sure her assessment shows why the mining operation should be shut down.

The book begins with de Bruin's accident and then goes into more procedural matters, but just when the reader is lulled into thinking that the danger is over and that the story is focusing on the the power plays between the consultants and plant management—an element of danger creeps in again. Connor finds that he is a target because the corporate interests do not want him to finish his investigation.

Even though the story is not driven by character, the author does relate sufficient personal details to make his characters fully-dimensional people. While he continues to work in South Africa, Connor's wife and children move to the relative safety of Australia. Connor later learns that, despite their relocation, his family is still in danger because of his work.

While the author is clearly very knowledgeable about the technical aspects of mining projects, the book falters in its own technical aspects. Thorough copy editing would make for a better reading experience, smoothing out awkward sentence structures, inserting missing commas, and resolving frequent use of the passive voice.

While Bagot's focus is on the tensions over the future of the de Bruin mining project, his story is not weighed down by the technical details, and it shows a great appreciation for both the landscape and the mingling of cultures that takes place in South Africa.

JADA BRADLEY (July 5, 2011)

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