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Galgut review
By Julie Wheelwright
The Independent (2008)

Damon Galgut, *The Impostor*, (Atlantic Books, £12.99) 249 pages

A ramshackle farmhouse on the hinterland of South Africa, a mysterious silent neighbour and a town where corruption has become a way of life. These are all the ingredients that go into making Damon Galgut's follow up to *The Good Doctor* a spin chilling read that doubles as a sharp and rather depressing critique of the 'new' South Africa.

The aptly-named Adam has fallen from grace in Johannesburg, losing his house and job in one fell-stroke. A major depression beckons so when his brother Gavin, purveyor of dodgy investments and bankrupt morals, suggests that he look after his house in the Karoo, he grabs it. Adam, author of a small volume of critically acclaimed poetry, settles into the farmhouse intent on reviving his career as a writer.

But his past intrudes when he meets, by chance, a friend from school who has inherited Gondawana, a game park and lost paradise that he plans to convert into a golf course. Through Kenneth Canning, who insists on calling him by his hated nickname of 'Nappy', he is drawn into the same morass of corruption that has made Gavin rich. It's fertile territory for a thriller with each encounter between the men upping the stakes until Adam reaches breaking point.

Galgut is a master at building suspense, infusing even the breathtaking landscape with a sinister edge. A sunset is a 'spectacular arterial sewage of colour,' a lion smells 'rank and unfathomable,' and even the weeds in his garden are making secret plans to stage a coup. But there is little relief from the patina of tension that encompasses every action and character in the novel.

Adam is a hard character to like or to care about. He's an expert at self-deprecation who dislikes Canning even while he becomes intimately drawn into his life and ultimately betrays him. There are also a handful of truly unfortunate lines including Kenneth's introduction to his wife. 'My wife Baby,' Canning says, 'Baby this is nappy.'

As the novel builds to a crisis between the two men, there seems a depressing inevitability about their story and its metaphor for South African politics. There isn't just one 'impostor' in this story but a host of them,; amoral business people disguised as social reformers and Africans selling their names and positions for a wad of cash. As Canning tells Adam, 'The guards and the thieves were the same people – there's South Africa in a nutshell.'

Galgut remains an arch story teller but seems to have slightly missed his mark with this contemporary thriller.

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