

HOW DID
WE GET
HERE?

BY NICK MULGREW

The seven gunshots that killed Brett Kebble in his car on a suburban Johannesburg street seven years ago also blew the cover on South Africa's political and criminal underworld. The court case which followed shed light on the intersecting webs of business, crime and politics that define South Africa's networks of power, but it was treated superficially by the press. Until radio journalist Mandy Wiener threaded together the minutiae of the protagonists' dealings and the latter stages of Kebble's life to produce a 400-page account of South Africa's underworld and what led to those gunshots that night in September 2005. Mandy Wiener talks about writing *Killing Kebble*, a howdunnit short-listed for this year's *Sunday Times* Alan Paton award.

Nick Mulgrew: What was the genesis of *Killing Kebble*?

Mandy Wiener: I was sitting in court in the Brett Kebble trial. By some quirk of coincidence, Jackie Selebi and Glenn Agliotti were in court on the same day, one after another. There was this remarkable scenario where the National Police Commissioner was in the dock, his alleged corruptor, Agliotti, in the dock next to him, and Guy Kebble is standing behind Agliotti, heckling him and saying, "Why did you kill my brother?" The man who accused Selebi of corruption is in the public gallery, and the three shooters of Brett Kebble, covered in tattoos, are being held in the other dock. I thought, "How did we get here as a country? How did our police commissioner end up in this gallery of rogues?" This was such an important story: it was the nexus of business, politics and organised crime in South Africa.

NM: Was writing in the first-person a conscious decision?

MW: It was something the publisher asked me to do, mainly because I had covered the story for Eyewitness News and had become associated with it. As a journalist, it's very difficult to write in the first person: you usually do everything in your power to keep yourself out of the story, to stay objective. For me, being a journalist is about being the conduit for the story: I don't pass judgment. I want to put all the versions on the table, and let the reader decide which one they believe is true. This was my transition from journalist to author.

NM: Why do you think more journalists are writing books? Is it a need for creative space to tell the intricacies of stories that daily news may not cover?

MW: For me, at least, it's definitely about the creativity. I certainly didn't do it for the money, and I certainly didn't think I'd sell 50 000 copies. I did it purely because the story I wanted to tell was so remarkable, and so multi-faceted that people had struggled to follow it. And the only way I could fully tell the story I wanted to tell was through writing a book.

NM: How did you find the shift from broadcast journalist to writer?

MW: It was terrifying. When you write for radio you have to write short and punchy reports, in three minutes flat. Now I had to sit at a desk for 12 or 14 hours to get 3 000 words out every day. I was writing under such pressure.

NM: How did you manage the relationships you had to enter to tell the story – with people like Mikey Schultz – who may have been tempted to influence your writing?

MW: The two questions that people always ask me about *Killing Kebble* are, "Were you ever scared?" and, "Are they your friends?" In reality, it was a very fine line between the two. I had to build a relationship with the shooters; they had never spoken to a journalist before and therefore had never trusted a journalist before. It goes completely against their

ethos to speak to journalists, so I had to get to the point where Mikey and I developed a personal relationship so that he could trust me.

I'd always informed my subjects from the beginning that they would not influence me. So, our agreement was that they would get to see the manuscript before it went to print, and they could tell me if there was anything factually inaccurate in it. I wouldn't take anything out simply if they didn't like it, because obviously there was a lot of content that I'd investigated. I would just add in their comments. It was important that the story was completely honest – and Mikey and the rest of them were remarkably honest – but there were some things in the end that they didn't like. Glenn Agliotti certainly didn't like it; in fact, he tweeted recently about how awful he thought the book was. That doesn't matter to me. For me, it was important that the book was as balanced as it could be.

NM: Why do you think the book has had such a strong following?

MW: I think the book has resonated with South Africans for a couple of reasons. The most remarkable one is that everyone I speak to seems to know somebody in the book – they've run into them somewhere, or they've seen them somewhere. I feel overwhelmed by the amount of people who have emailed me or phoned me or seen me and said that they once did business with whoever. It's something that's familiar to a lot of people.

And I think it's because the story takes place in the shopping centres we go to, the nightclubs we frequent, and the highways we drive on every day. What's frightened people about the Kebble story is that they never realised what was going on, even though it happened right in front of them.

NM: Many reviewers commented on your verbatim integration of tweets and text messages into the narrative of the book. What do you think the story gains from those sorts of communications?

MW: This was the first story of its kind in South Africa, in that the reporting on Twitter from court journalists at the Kebble case every day had never really happened in the country before. As someone who was involved in that, it was important for me to include that. That has been the biggest criticism I have received from readers. They think it's lazy journalism and lazy writing. Usually it's older people who aren't on Twitter who don't get it.

NM: Do you have plans for more writing?

MW: I would very much like to write another book. In fact, I would really like to write a sequel, which is playing itself out right now: it's the same sort of story, but this time with Bheki Cele, Radovan Krejcir and Richard Mdluli. I don't think that story's ripe to be told yet, though. It's also probably a far more dangerous tale to tell. The other difficulty, of course, is that the Kebble story was a once-in-a-career kind of story. It's a humdinger, true crime, political murder mystery – it's got it all, and it's going to be very hard to find another story like that.