



## **“Hell’s view”: Van de Ruit’s *Spud* – changing the boys’ school story tradition?**

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### **Abstract**

**“Hell’s view”: Van de Ruit’s *Spud* – changing the boys’ school story tradition?**

*The article identifies salient features of Van de Ruit’s novels “Spud: a wickedly funny novel” (2005) and “Spud – the madness continues” (2007) and compares them with the corresponding motifs commonly found in historical British boys’ school stories, tracing shifts in discourse to establish the novels’ construction of a South African boyhood. The article argues that through his conscious subversion of the imperial model’s defining discourses, Van de Ruit’s fictional representation of Spud’s school experience portrays the previously accepted “ideal” construction of boyhood, with its unmistakably defined principles and uncontested ethical code, as fundamentally challenged by the variety of alternative discourses to which the modern protagonist is exposed. The resultant construction of Spud’s South African boyhood is, therefore, characterised by the protagonist’s constant struggle to assimilate the frequently incongruous and bewildering discourses (about moral courage and personal integrity, in particular) that compete for his attention. The pivotal component of this particular construction of boyhood may be argued not to be a strict adherence to a clearly defined schoolboy ethic, but as a variable that is ultimately dependent on the boy’s choices.*

## Opsomming

### **"Hell's view": Van de Ruit se *Spud* – 'n omwenteling in die tradisionele skoolverhaal vir seuns?**

*Hierdie artikel identifiseer sentrale eienskappe van Van de Ruit se romans "Spud: a wickedly funny novel" (2005) en "Spud – the madness continues" (2007) en vergelyk dit met die ooreenstemmende motiewe wat algemeen in tradisionele Britse skoolverhale oor seuns voorkom. Die artikel ondersoek ook diskoersverskuiwings om die romans se konstruksie van Suid-Afrikaanse seunsjare te bepaal. Die skrywer voer aan dat Van de Ruit, deur middel van sy doelbewuste ondermyning van die bepalende diskoerse van die imperiale model in sy fiktiewe uitbeelding van Spud se skoolwedervarings, die voorheen aanvaarde, "ideale" konstruksie van seunsjare (met sy onmiskenbaar omskrewe beginsels en onbestrede etiese kode) uitbeeld as iets wat fundamenteel bevraagteken word deur die verskeidenheid alternatiewe diskoerse waaraan die hedendaagse protagonis blootgestel word. Die gevolglike konstruksie van Spud se Suid-Afrikaanse seunsjare word derhalwe gekenmerk deur die protagonis se konstante worsteling met die assimilasië van die dikwels lagwekkende diskoerse (oor morele moed en persoonlike integriteit in die besonder) wat hom verwar terwyl hulle meeding om sy aandag. Die slotsom is dat die spil van hierdie spesifieke konstruksie van seunsjare nie soseer streng gehoorsaamheid aan 'n duidelik omskrewe skoolseunetos is nie, maar wel 'n veranderlike is wat uiteindelik van die keuses wat die seun maak, afhang.*

## 1. Introduction

South African author John van de Ruit's *Spud: a wickedly<sup>1</sup> funny novel* (2005) has enjoyed phenomenal success.<sup>2</sup> Its sequel, *Spud –*

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1 Van de Ruit's repetition of the term *wicked* confirms that it is mainly intended to convey the conversational tone of teenage slang, a stylistic device on which authors of early school stories, such as Angela Brazil, were criticised (Cadogan & Craig, 1986:117), but which became increasingly popular with the "realistic" children's books from the 1960s. However, Greig (2006:18) comments:

After the 100th encounter with the word 'wicked' – as in 'He looks wickedly savage' or 'He looked wickedly guilty' – it is clear that the issue isn't adolescent self-expression but the author's determination to merrily paddle and repaddle the shallows.

2 Booknews (Anon., 2009) reported that according to Nielsen Bookscan, the first *Spud* novel has a "lifetime figure of more than 118 000 units". The book also won the Booksellers Choice Award in 2006.

*the madness continues ...* (2007),<sup>3</sup> follows firmly in its predecessor's footsteps and continues the story of young scholarship student, John Milton (nicknamed "Spud" due to the delayed onset of puberty), at an elite private boys' school in KwaZulu-Natal.

The narrative begins in 1990, the year in which Nelson Mandela was released, and one in which – infinitely more important in the novel – Spud tries to adjust to his new life at a posh, upper-class school. Written in the first person, the diary format<sup>4</sup> of the novel allows the reader an (extremely funny but at times also disturbingly) intimate glimpse into the protagonist's inward struggles and the frequently confused thought processes allegedly typical of pre-adolescence, the awakening of a moral consciousness and social awareness.

The locale of the novels and vivid depictions of life at an exclusive boys' school moulded in the traditional British style, suggest that Van de Ruit's books may be interpreted in terms of the traditional British boys' school story genre. However, in the early 1980s, some scholars commented on the apparent death of the traditional boys' school story. According to Musgrave (1985:1), for example "the genre was conceived around the middle of the [nineteenth] century and was almost dead before the Second World War". Quigly (1982:1) links this apparent demise to what she regards as the shifting nature and function of the public schools these books claim to represent. In *The heirs of Tom Brown*, Quigly argues that

... the public school in its heyday lasted for about a century [...]. Of course it existed before that and it still exists today, but not in the form made familiar by school stories to many who had never been there. [...] It was a different place – different in style and function, in atmosphere and methods, in ideas and motives, different, above all in its effect. (Quigly, 1982:1.)

This is primarily because public schools became the locus for the reinforcement and circulation of imperial discourses (Robertson, 2009:51). When confidence in British imperialism was high, and "a

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3 *Spud: a wickedly funny novel* (2005) is called *Spud* in this article, and *Spud – the madness continues ...*, (2007) is called *Spud II*.

4 Von Klemperer (2005:9) points out that the diary format "recalls Sue Townsend's *Diary of Adrian Mole*, which even gets a mention in the text". However, Van de Ruit claims that he was "very conscious of trying not to turn his book into a South African *Adrian Mole*" and asserts that "Adrian Mole is only a window into himself – Spud is the introduction to the other characters as well as himself, and the world they live in."

particular kind of training was required to produce a particular kind of man", the public school became a functional powerhouse. When this confidence waned, the training it gave, as well as the men it produced, seemed, quite suddenly, irrelevant to the world (Quigly 1982:1). Quigly's argument with regard to the public school may be valid, but several recent and extremely popular publications, including the Harry Potter series and Van de Ruit's two novels, deal with boy protagonists in the context of exclusive fictional schools. It falls beyond the scope of this article to discuss books such as the Harry Potter-series, but they have been comprehensively discussed elsewhere (Armitstead, 1999; Manners Smith, 2003; Steege, 2002; Robertson, 2009). Such recent books cause one to enquire whether elements of the traditional boys' school story have indeed survived, and, if so, in what form. To what extent do the ideas, formulaic elements and motifs found in such recent school stories for and/or about boys differ from those found in their historical counterparts?

This article focuses on those elements of Van de Ruit's first two novels that appear as recurrent motifs reminiscent of (British) traditional boys' school stories.<sup>5</sup> The similarities and/or differences between the chronologically disparate texts are discussed against the background of discourse theory, and the effect of the implied discourses on the representation of the protagonist's fictional South African boyhood. The notion of discourse as the underlying framework operating in a social context, determined by that social context, and contributing to the way that social context continues its existence, is particularly applicable to the relatively isolated social context of school (Mills, 2004:10). In this article, "discourse" is seen as

... speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience – 'ideology' in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded. (Mills, 2004:5.)

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5 The detailed account of Spud's experiences may be interpreted as constitutive of a *Bildungsroman*, which in the broadest sense, is "the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order" (Hader, 1996:1). However, unlike Tom Brown's Schooldays, it is debatable whether either of the Spud novels reflects significant moral development by the protagonist.

In a similar vein, Foucault (2003:49) claims that one of the most productive ways of thinking of discourse is not merely as a group of signs or a portion of text, but as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”.

The maintenance of dominant or prevalent discourses within a particular social context is inextricably linked with the concept of power and control. According to Noomé (2006:121), control involves “the ‘normalisation’ of the discourse”, which, in the case of this study, would be the schoolboy ethic. Conformation to (or dissension from) the guiding principles of the defining discourses which collectively constitute the schoolboy ethic, thus forms an essential aspect of Van de Ruit’s construction and representation of boyhood. In this study, the guiding principles of critical discourse analysis (Locke, 2004) are employed to facilitate the exploration and discussion of discourses which pervade and construct fictional representations of the boy protagonist in school through an analysis of the textual and social practices (or recurrent motifs and formulaic elements) that characterise works of this genre, comparing Van de Ruit’s novels to the tradition.

Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s schooldays* (1857), the acknowledged benchmark of traditional boys’ school stories is used as a starting point, along with a number of other school stories by Talbot Baines Reed, John Finnemore, Harold Avery and Frank Richards. They show that the effect of dominant discourses on the representation of the protagonist in historical texts of this kind generally culminates in the replication of the archetypal ideal British schoolboy, even when these earlier examples of the genre appear to be subversive, as in the case of Frank Richards’s work (Robertson, 2009:164). This type of boy is allegedly identified by his admirable physical and moral courage, outstanding athletic prowess, honesty and strict though cheerful adherence to a rigid code of honour that scorns backing down from a fight, discourages the outward display of emotions and rejects any form of snitching (Robertson, 2009: 165). These physical and psychological character traits were also seen to be clearly delineated and principally dictated by the ideals of “Muscular Christianity” – described by Bristow (1991:61) as a combination of “fighting fitness and moral fibre”. By comparing some of the formulaic elements, (fagging, corporal punishment and sport matches) found in the *Spud* novels with their historical counterparts, it is possible to ascertain to what extent Van de Ruit’s books are representative of this genre. A full separate discussion of the benchmark historical texts falls beyond the scope of the article (cf. Robert-

son, 2009), but a discussion of such formulaic elements and relevant comparisons are woven in throughout.

Although the *Spud* books are being prescribed by some schools as textbooks, the target audience is debatable. Much of the situational humour appeals to teenage readers, such as the evident obsession with bodily functions, but the presumably satirical elements and the author's classification of the first book as a "novel" would indicate (at least initially) an older intended readership. If an older readership is assumed, the novels may perhaps be interpreted as a form of satire somewhat akin to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's travels*. Moreover, for readers who attended Michaelhouse<sup>6</sup> at approximately the same time as John van de Ruit, the nicknames used in the novels may hold a similar fascination to that typical of the *roman à clef*.

The novels may reasonably be categorised as representative of these adult literary forms, but this article is concerned with the aspects of Van de Ruit's books reminiscent of traditional British boys' school stories. The relevance of this comparison lies in the consideration that "private schools that were established in South Africa towards the end of the imperial era were modelled on British public schools" (Jenkins, 1993:47). In *Children of the sun*, Jenkins (1993: 48) adds that

South African schools were staffed by expatriate British schoolmasters and schoolmistresses and took on all the trappings of their British models: 'houses', prefects, uniforms, compulsory games, corporal punishment and military cadets for the boys, a classical curriculum and the old school network.

Furthermore, in *Arnolds of the Bushveld*, Honey (1976:23) argues that the implicit elitism of the British public school system was

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6 The school is never named in the novels, but Van de Ruit admits that his *alma mater*, Michaelhouse, was indeed his "visual base" for the book. In an interview he (Paterson, 2005:1) claimed that

... a lot of things happened to me while I was at Michaelhouse and I've lost track of what's real and what's not. I have embellished it and included the myths that were around when I was there. I've also used other people's stories. But there is truth at its core.

In another interview Van de Ruit claimed that Michaelhouse has "totally embraced" the book as a fictional representation of itself and is using the novel "as a text book" (Lee, 2006:17). Moreover, the present Rector of Michaelhouse claims that "Spud [sic] has been a good recruiting tool" for the school (Von Klemperer, 2007:2).

“functionally appropriate to the existing social and political system of South Africa”. Nevertheless, while the British educational model was regarded as the ideal, the different environment and community caused an inevitable and often much deplored difference in the type of English-speaking schoolboy produced in South Africa versus that produced in the United Kingdom. For example, Montague J. Rendall, a former headmaster and Chairman of the Public Schools Empire Tours Company (an organisation committed to the international promotion of public school notions and ideals), observed the following concerning South African schoolboys in the 1940s (cited in Jenkins, 1993:48):

If I were to design a medal for one of these Schoolboys the superscription might be ‘Child of the Sun’; the obverse a figure of ‘independence with a Shield’ [...] and the reverse should just be a bright star to symbolise the Sun. [...] The rest of the field would consist of several Rugby footballs and a scanty heap of books. For indeed, truth to tell, this wholesome brown boy [...] who looks straight at you from rather wild eyes half-hidden in a mat of hair, is just a Child of the Sun ... They are by nature Children of the Sun, Sun-worshippers, and culture has little meaning for them. Why should parents and schoolmasters disturb this happy dream?

Be that as it may, the desire to emulate the apparently ideal British model remained strong, and it is certain that Michaelhouse, which Van de Ruit has admitted to using as the model for Spud’s school, was one of those schools which strove to imitate the grand tradition. In a masculinist study, Morrell (2001:58) claims that Michaelhouse

... had a strong connection with Rugby. Its predecessor, Bishop’s College in Pietermaritzburg, was headed by C.C. Prichard, curate at Rugby and Oxford graduate. Its first headmaster was a public school boy and Glasgow and Cambridge University graduate. He was followed by Canon E.B. Hugh Jones (1903-10) of Marlborough and Jesus College, Oxford. The following three headmasters were all public school products [...] and all were Cambridge graduates.

The school was established in 1896, and on Speech Day in 1897 the founder of the institution, James Cameron Todd, described the school’s vision in terms clearly imitative of its British counterparts: “Our aim is to make, not accountants, not clerks, not clergymen, but men; men of understanding, thought and culture.” (Official Michaelhouse Website, s.a.) To this day, Michaelhouse prides itself on its British heritage, a feature which is even described as a main

characteristic of the architectural layout of the school. One is informed that "archways and corridors connect each quadrangle, reminiscent of the architectural design of leading British schools" (Official Michaelhouse Website, s.a.).

## **2. Spud and his dormitory mates – "one helluva collection of nutters"<sup>7</sup>**

The main boy protagonists of *Spud* (one hesitates to use the term *heroes*) are John Milton (alias Spud) and his dormitory mates. They soon become notorious as "the Crazy Eight". Far removed from the bright-eyed, open-faced, pleasant and somewhat predictable fictional schoolboys of the past, these characters encompass the entire range between the rather ordinary Simon Brown, who is destined to become the best cricketer in the school, and the allegedly mentally unstable Vern Blackadder (otherwise known as "Rain Man"), who repeatedly pulls out large chunks of his own hair and almost routinely chats to his toiletries before bedtime. Between these two extremes one encounters the morally deficient and overly confident – though undeniably outwardly masculine – "Rambo", who has a "non-platonic" relationship with his drama teacher, nicknamed "Eve" (the wife of the housemaster, Mr Wilson, alias "Sparerib"),<sup>8</sup> and "Boggo, a greasy looking boy with big teeth and a bad case of pimples" (p. 11),<sup>9</sup> who is obsessed with pornography and anything similarly obscene. The trigger-happy "Mad Dog" fails to pass a single examination during the two years he actually spends at the school, and dedicates almost all of his time to hunting with his catapult, although his impassioned (demented?) bowling style earns him some fame as a cricketer.

Then, there is Spud, the physically undersized protagonist, from whose perspective every aspect of the narrative is portrayed. Al-

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7 Spud fondly describes the Crazy Eight as "one helluva collection of nutters" (Van de Ruit, 2005:387).

8 Traditional boys' school stories tend to almost completely exclude female characters from the narrative, thereby emphasising the isolated nature of the boys' public school microcosm. The inclusion of female characters, not only as members of staff but also as girlfriends – along with a degree of romantic interest – in the *Spud* novels therefore diverges completely from the norm. Because there is no comparable element in traditional stories, a discussion of this falls beyond the scope of this article.

9 References with only a page number refer to Van der Ruit (2005).



though his fellows treat him in a generally friendly manner, he never gains overwhelming popularity. Reading between the lines, it is clear that he always remains a bit of an outsider. His inherent tendency to seek solitude (in order to read or update his diary), may contribute to this sense of mild alienation. It is probably aggravated by the fact that Spud is a scholarship student, implying that, although he has obtained admission, as well as the financial support required to attend the school, he is by no means as wealthy<sup>10</sup> as any of his privileged peers.

Over and above this, Spud's late physical development and his beautiful soprano voice, which causes the choir mistress to become "embarrassingly excited" (p. 29), expose the protagonist to ruthless mockery and derision, especially when Spud is instructed to allow his hair to grow by the director of the school musical, *Oliver*, in which Spud plays the lead role (p. 157). Spud reflects, "I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. Long shaggy brown hair, greeny-brown, olive eyes. Small button nose, roundish face, skinny body. [...] God must be laughing at me." (p. 294.)

To further identify Spud as a deviation from the traditional boy-hero, Spud frequently self-reflectively mourns his lack of courage in the face of opposition which usually takes the form of peer pressure. For example, when Rambo, the self-appointed king of the dormitory who "includes enough swearing in every sentence to satisfy the group that he means business and is to be heartily respected and hero-worshipped"<sup>11</sup> (p. 8), informs the Crazy Eight that they will all be

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10 Van de Ruit uses Spud's relative poverty to great comic effect, especially when the shuddering, staggering family vehicle arrives at the Under 14A-cricket matches (p. 22):

A humungous explosion distracted our master player at the precise moment that the bowler released his delivery [...]. I held my head in my hands. [...] I knew that an explosion of such magnitude could only have been created by a pea green 1973 Renault station wagon. My parents had arrived.

11 A humorous example of Rambo's confidence and sense of mocking self-importance occurs in *Spud II* when Rambo arrives back at school unexpectedly after being expelled (Van de Ruit, 2007:307):

There was a long silence. Finally Vern shone his torch on the shadow.  
 "Rambo!" shouted Vern.  
 "Oh my God!" gasped Fatty.  
 "You're both right," replied Rambo and dragged his trunk into the dormitory.

participating in a highly illegal night swim,<sup>12</sup> Spud is initially at the head of the dissenters. Nevertheless, "order was finally restored when Rambo threatened to murder anyone being cowardly. (Needless to say we all cowardly backed down)" (p. 30).

Spud's closest friend turns out to be the sickly and accident-prone Gecko, whose "paleness creates a strange luminous light". Despite his weak constitution and the remarkable physical likeness, Gecko is essentially the opposite of cowardly Unwin, the "gutless gecko" character described in Marguerite Poland's *Iron love* (1999:122). Instead, Gecko's words and deeds cause Spud to reconsider his own morally reprehensible behaviour (p. 240):

I felt terrible shame and guilt. I remembered all the times I'd jeered and snickered and mocked Gecko in front of the others, all because it made me feel stronger and part of the pack. But Gecko had real courage. To tell somebody that they're special takes courage. I reckon this vomiting, pale-faced Gecko has more guts than the rest of the Crazy Eight put together.

The depiction of Gecko's character suggests a discourse of courage essentially different from the traditional idea of physical prowess and fearlessness as an external vindication of innate moral fibre and bravery. In fact, Gecko is so different from the stereotyped plucky schoolboy (who never pales at the prospect of a hard tackle), that during his first rugby trial, he is labelled a "blithering disgrace" by the coach due to the fact that "in the first movement he sprinted away from the ball at full speed" (p. 172). In his terror at finally being given the ball, Gecko crowns his limited rugby achievements by running

... straight off the field and into the main pavilion where he locked himself in the ladies' toilet. Vern was sent in to retrieve the ball and, after some gentle persuasion, managed to negotiate its release so that the trials could continue. (p. 172.)

Van de Ruit seems to insinuate that one does not need to be "a first team rugby god" (p. 283) to have moral backbone. This view is quite unlike Hughes's (1971:90) clear association of the one with the other in *Tom Brown's schooldays*, when he expresses his belief that "as endless as are boys' characters, so are their ways of facing or not facing a scrummage at football".

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12 The forbidden midnight swim may be seen as a South African variant of the forbidden midnight feast typical of many school stories.

Then there is Fatty, an obese and gluttonous boy, who, during his first rugby trial, manages to play for about three minutes before “falling over and wheezing like a beached whale” (p. 172). In *Spud II*, The Guv refers to Fatty as “our man Falstaff” (Van de Ruit, 2007: 186). Of course, the most obvious similarity between the obese schoolboy and the Shakespearian character lies in their shared tendency to gluttony and over-indulgence. In this respect, the other “schoolboy Falstaff”, the inimitable Billy Bunter,<sup>13</sup> also comes to mind (Robertson, 2009:139).

Despite the bizarre and seemingly incompatible characteristics of the respective individuals, Spud and his dormitory mates soon acquire joint notoriety as the Crazy Eight, a peer group of such unique qualities that it functions as an autonomous character in the narrative. Although the boys generally cooperate with each other under the pseudo-heroic motto “All for one”, circumstances occasionally reveal the subliminal tension that is apt to occur within so varied a collection of personalities. Scenes of fights between sworn friends break out in displays of violence quite unheard of in traditional boys’ school stories (p. 90).

For the first time our dormitory was the scene of some real ugliness. What followed was shocking. Rambo punched Fatty in the face. Fatty fell back against the locker. Mad Dog charged in and attacked Rambo, who bit a chunk of flesh out of Mad Dog’s shoulder. [...] There was blood everywhere and Fatty was sobbing like a little boy. I felt like helping him. I wanted to put something over his nose to stop the blood. He lay on the floor like a great dying animal surrounded by curious onlookers. I felt sick. [...] An hour ago it was All for one; now it was Dog eat dog! (Or man eats Mad Dog.)

This uncontrolled and violent display of anger is very different from the discourse of fighting found in historical works of this genre. In these early works considerable emphasis is placed on self-control and the use of scientific and athletic prowess to resolve conflict. Indiscriminate acts of violence are, therefore, severely criticised in traditional boys’ school stories as sure signs of a weak moral character and undisciplined temper.

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13 In some ways Billy Bunter is perhaps more deserving of the comparison with Shakespeare’s character, because, coupled with his greed, Bunter displays an apparent inability to tell the truth and a tendency to gross exaggeration that parallel the infamous vices of Falstaff.

Nevertheless, despite the occasional scraps between its members, the Crazy Eight essentially becomes an emotional haven for each of the boys, a society in which they generally experience a sense of acceptance, despite an underlying tendency to cruelty. Hence, after being cooped up in the sanatorium for a considerable period, Spud comments, "I've kind of missed the old dog eats dog world of the dorm. And hell, there's nothing like the Crazy Eight for sheer entertainment value." (p. 271.) As Spud notes in his diary, "after a while the madness becomes normal" (p. 84). Thus, the alternative discourse of peer interaction represented by the Crazy Eight is shown by Van de Ruit to have become an accepted part of Spud's school experience and perspectives of friendship.

### **3. Representations of the school ethos**

Van de Ruit's exposé (albeit humorous) of some of the insalubrious realities of a boys' school raises questions about the frequently expressed discourse of the school as an emotional and physical sanctuary for boys.<sup>14</sup> He subverts the idea by pointing out that for physically, mentally and especially emotionally vulnerable boys, the school presents itself as a place of torture – a society in which the weak suffer persecution. Gecko says:

I tell you, Spud, this place is like an insane asylum! There are maniacs in this place – even our headmaster's a maniac! Don't you feel it too? It's like there's always someone out to get you, or laugh at you or make you feel like an idiot or coward or something ... (p. 239.)

Spud's subsequent thoughts sum up the actual state of affairs: "Gecko is right – if you are on the wrong side of the fence, this place is hell." (p. 240.)

For example, when Mad Dog unjustly mocks the emotionally fragile Vern in front of the entire dormitory, Spud feels ashamed that he is unable to find the courage to stand up for his cubicle mate (p. 18). Nevertheless, Spud's feelings of guilt are not translated into actions, and his passive approach does not change, as later on a similar scene occurs in the dormitory shortly after Vern has been removed from the school and placed in a psychiatric institution for assess-

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14 Rowling's Harry Potter series also subverts the idea of the school as a physical and emotional sanctuary. I discuss this issue at length in Robertson (2009).

ment. Again Spud mentions his inner misgivings, but enjoys the joke at Vern's expense:

Rambo then joined in and the pair did a wicked impersonation of Rain Man [Vern] and a psychologist in the nuthouse. Felt guilty to be laughing my head off. (p. 57.)

Furthermore, in contrast to the traditional so-called "honour bright" discourse of integrity so typical of historical boys' school stories, Spud is confronted with completely divergent ideas concerning the value of honesty. Not only do his school fellows adhere to dictums like "if you're gonna lie – lie big" (p. 27), but several events and their outcomes<sup>15</sup> cause Spud to claim that "in this place honesty gets you nowhere" (p. 308). Even Spud's English teacher, Mr Edly (alias The Guv), offers him some dubious counsel (p. 260). The fact that a teacher can advise a pupil not to be strictly honest, is indeed a deviation from the tradition, as is the advice Spud receives from the school psychologist, "Dr Zoo":

[N]obody is going to hate a fourteen-year-old for two-timing his girlfriend. At least not for long. You're too young to take your relationships so seriously – go out there, burn or be burned. If you don't take a bite into Eve's apple now, you may never get the chance again. (p. 296.)

Hence, the essentially distorted discourses which permeate the novels are evidence that, in the fictional form recreated by Van de Ruit, the school experience provides little encouragement for the boys to attain the high ideals summarised by the present Rector of Michaelhouse, Guy N. Pearson, in a speech delivered in 2006 (Official Michaelhouse Website, s.a.):

At Michaelhouse we strive to produce young men with a man's determination to do right, a man's courage to do good, a man's sympathy for other people's troubles, a man's patience and strength with his own and a man's intolerance for injustice to others.

While the ideal and, indeed, previously largely unchallenged discourse concerning general obedience encourages the boys to "do right", Spud struggles to do this as he is surrounded by advocates of

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15 When Emberton and Devries place a banana in the exhaust pipe of the headmaster's car and are subsequently suspended, pending expulsion, they connive with Mad Dog to get their punishment reversed. Their dishonesty seems to pay off when they are allowed to return to the school.

an alternative discourse of disobedience which propagates the blatant defiance of rules for no rational reason except an apparently necessary display of insubordination. In some ways, this coincides with Tom Brown's early experiences at Rugby. Bristow (1991:69) notes that "Tom Brown for one did not always do as he was told. [...] Were he to be entirely dutiful, he would not be independent." This comment suggests that the discourse of disobedience is not unprecedented. However, the comparatively innocent misdemeanours committed by Tom Brown and most of his fictional successors do not include drinking, smoking, stealing or similar acts of blatant dishonesty, and would thus be more correctly identified as forming part of a discourse of mischief. Moreover, in this historical text, disobedience is not presented as a dominant and generally endorsed way of behaving – as is clearly the case in the Spud novels.

For example, when Spud decides, along with two other members of the Crazy Eight, to drink wine on the school bus, he notes that they were "warmly congratulated for our complete disregard for the school rules" (p. 95). Later in the novel, when Vern and Gecko attempt to break into the school laboratory to steal lab rats for Roger the cat and are caught red-handed,

... Rambo congratulated them for their courage and their disrespect for the school rules. They both grinned like idiots and looked incredibly proud of their achievement. (p. 130.)

Once, Spud is cajoled into participating in a raid on the school kitchen for no sensible motive except a desire to break the school rules (p. 200). "How do you explain to your parents that you were expelled for stealing food from the school kitchen when you're not even hungry?"

Although they frequently escape punishment for their misdemeanours, the intrepid Crazy Eight are caught smoking and drinking alcohol in the Mad House. Their punishments are severe – five of them are beaten and suspended from school. Rambo and Mad Dog are expelled. Despite the disgrace, the boys still seem to take some pride in their crazy and frequently illegal exploits. As usual, it is Rambo who speaks from the perspective of a particularly subversive discourse of disobedience (Van de Ruit, 2007:281).

Rambo stood on his footlocker and said, 'In case this is the end for the Crazy Eight I just want to say that it's been a hell of two years with you guys.' He then started to choke up which made us all choke up. 'Anyway, it's been cool. And, hey, what can I

say? The Crazy Eight went out with a bang, not a whimper!’ We all shook hands and paws and returned to our beds in silence.

The sense of pride is obvious and further emphasised by the fact that both Rambo and Mad Dog reiterate these sentiments as they say goodbye to Spud. Rambo, who initially mocks Spud for his diary routine says, “You know what? Now I’m glad you wrote it all down in your diary – because then one day maybe people will know what we did.” (Van de Ruit, 2007:286.)

#### 4. Caning – “we take our punishment like men”<sup>16</sup>

Because the Crazy Eight consists of such a wide variety of different characters, Van de Ruit is able to portray diverse responses to corporal punishment in the same episode. This strategy highlights the humour implicit in the non-traditional behaviour of some of the boys, as well as the alternative discourses they represent.

Spud recalls his initial shock when he witnesses his first beating with a sawn-off hockey stick in an Afrikaans class. This episode is somewhat subversive due to the teacher’s unexpected response to what Spud sees as Fatty’s bravery during his ordeal. Instead of the teacher’s appreciating Fatty’s ability to take his thrashing “without so much as flinching” (p. 30) – the response commended in traditional boys’ school stories – his response angers the teacher more; a circumstance which not only earns Fatty additional detention, but also causes the whole class to be punished with extra homework. The discursive basis for the teacher’s unanticipated reaction perhaps lies in a discourse of corporal punishment that views the caning process as an apparently legitimate way for the teacher to assuage his own anger by inflicting physical pain on the perpetrator. Fatty’s brave response, therefore, while perhaps admirable in itself, does nothing to appease the teacher’s frustration, and thus further punishment is deemed necessary.

While Fatty is able to handle a thrashing with a considerable amount of “stiff upper lip”, the rest of the Crazy Eight are often not able to emulate him. When the boys are caught “night swimming”, they are informed that their punishment will be four lashes each from their housemaster, Sparerib, who by all accounts “beats like a sadist”<sup>17</sup>

16 p. 89.

17 C.S. Lewis (1991:27) presents a far more disturbing image of apparent sadism in his autobiographical text *Surprised by joy*:

(p. 31). Rambo prides himself on his masculinity and manages to keep up his tough reputation by "walking casually" away from the housemaster's office, but even he is unable to "hide the pain in his face" (p. 98). Similarly true to form, Mad Dog saunters out of the room smiling, but this is where the heroism ends. Van de Ruit launches into a series of reactions to caning which amuse the reader because of their obvious deviations from the norm (p. 98).

Boggo sped out, rubbing his [backside]. Much to the delight of the growing crowd, he pulled down his pants and cooled his bum on the red brick cloister wall. By this stage I was all set to run away, or wet myself. Then Gecko flew out of the office, screaming, and vomited in the gutter.

I staggered into the office and could hear the noise of the crowd outside. 'Hands on the chair, Milton, and grit your teeth,' said Sparerib as if he was offering me a cup of tea and a chocolate biscuit. [...]

Then I was running. My backside was on fire. [...] I kept running and running and running and then I was laughing and shouting.

Another example of the actual effects of the subversive discourse of disobedience discussed above is that, despite the consideration that they were being punished for wilful disregard of the school rules, the other schoolboys (junior and senior), do not treat the Crazy Eight with any kind of censure or reproach. Instead, Spud recalls that "the entire house was looking at us like we were celebrities" (p. 99), and "people I didn't know were thumping me on the back and laughing" (p. 98).

Among themselves, the shared pain of the ordeal only serves to strengthen the bonds of loyalty between the members of the Crazy Eight (p. 98).

Rambo shook my hand and Mad Dog threw his arm around my shoulder. There was Simon and Boggo and Vern and Gecko, laughing, talking rubbish. Tonight we were once again brothers in arms.

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Everyone talks about sadism nowadays [...] I have seen Oldie make that child bend down at the end of the schoolroom and then take a run of the room's length at each stroke; but P. was the trained sufferer of countless thrashings and no sound escaped him until, towards the end of the torture, there came a noise quite unlike a human utterance. That peculiar croaking or rattling cry, that, and the grey faces of all the other boys, and their deathlike stillness, are among the memories I could willingly dispense with.



## 5. Sport motifs: “We are no longer boys. Tomorrow we fight like men”<sup>18</sup>

The *Spud* novels, like many historical boys’ school stories, contain many sport-war metaphors. As Bristow (1991:57) comments, “the school playing field is like a battleground where heroic deeds are done”. As Spud writes shortly after a particularly lucky moment in a cricket match, “I hate to admit it, dear diary, but I am a hero” (p. 24). Nevertheless, Van de Ruit subverts the traditional discourse by building on it, and allowing not only the students, but more particularly, the teachers to subscribe to it with ludicrous sincerity. For example, the Guv subjects Spud and his cricket team-mates to an “impassioned team talk” during which he “even quoted an entire Shakespearian speech, which he reckons was said by King Henry the Fifth before the battle of Asiancaw [sic]. He also threatened to castrate us if we lost” (p. 21).

The Guv’s pseudo-dramatic approach to some extent strengthens the prevalent discourse in its fervent incitement to bravery, but is undermined by his concluding (empty) threat and the fact that he is applying the discursive structure, usually associated with contact sports such as rugby, to the considerably less combative game of cricket. In *Spud II*, the Guv’s pep talk takes on an unprecedented but effective form (Van de Ruit, 2007:23; emphasis – JR).

The Guv made us listen to a tape of Beethoven at full volume in the change room before our match against Drake College. Our coach strode around conducting the recorded orchestra with my cricket bat. After the piece finished, he told us to ‘Render all helpless in *the eternal fight for blinding glory*’. We all looked as aggressive as possible and Mad Dog punched a dent in the toilet door.

Once again, Van de Ruit’s decision to end the stirring episode with a comical anti-climax seems to suggest an alternative perspective that considers the sport-war discourse pretentious and over-rated. Even Spud’s description of the “first team rugby gods”,<sup>19</sup> consisting of “six feet and four inches of pure muscle” (p. 178), smacks of the farcical.

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18 p. 179.

19 Van de Ruit is clearly satirising the age-old veneration of the athletically gifted schoolboy. As Day-Lewis comments of Sherbourne public school in his day, “[i]t was the blue-and-gold ties of the First XV or the First XI which made them demi-gods” (cited in Quigly, 1982:51).

[The captain's] voice was deep and rich and with his steely-eyed looks he instantly hiked up the atmosphere to breaking point. [...] 'We are no longer boys. Tomorrow we fight like men.'

The war cry practice in *Spud II*, however, not only sees the boys reiterating these hostile sentiments, but also testifies to an increase in bloodthirstiness and brutality, a circumstance which serves to highlight the implicit facetiousness of such violent commands (Van de Ruit, 2007:133).

The first war cry practice of the year was pretty intense. Anderson got so fired up in his captaincy speech that he told us to not only destroy the Blacksmith College rugby teams but to 'mangle their broken bodies and spit on their corpses' as well. This seemed to go down well with the school because there was screeching and sounds of horror from the backbenchers (matrics who don't play rugby). Pike showed his school spirit by hurling two of the Darryls off the top of the stands and then bleating like a sheep.

Furthermore, Van de Ruit seems to mock the do-or-die attitude implicit in this kind of speech by describing Vern Blackadder's impassioned (and amusing) way of putting it into action (Van de Ruit, 2007:141).

Vern scored two tries and surprised everyone by having a brilliant game. He's developed his own technique of catching the ball and then screaming like a psychopath before charging straight at the opposition wing. Both times the opposition wing ran away in terror and Vern scored under the poles.

Nevertheless, the author reserves his most revolutionary sporting moments for the under 14D-rugby team and their unconventional coach, Mr Lilly, who arrives at the first practice "dressed in long pants, white socks and tennis shoes", thus providing a refreshing change "from all the other coaches on various fields sprinting around in rugby boots, barking orders and blowing their whistles" (p. 175). Apparently,

... Mr Lilly is a pacifist who's incredibly concerned about us hurting ourselves. He doesn't use a whistle, but claps his hands when play must be stopped. (He reckons whistles are a symbol of oppression.) His strategy is to have fun and be gentle with one another. (p. 175.)

In fact, it would seem that according to Mr Lilly's implied and thoroughly unconventional perception of rugby, a successful match is

not necessarily one in which the players exhibit a do-or-die determination to win, but rather one during which no injuries are sustained. Nonetheless, after the team's umpteenth defeat, this time by an Afrikaans team (who allegedly "took the game way too seriously"), even the eternally optimistic Mr Lilly struggles to find anything positive "amongst the wreckage" (p. 210). "Eventually he said that we showed remarkable consistency (consistently bad?) and spirit far beyond our young years." (p. 210.) Thus, Van de Ruit's extreme subversion of the norm allows for a significant amount of situational humour.

## 6. Fagging – "my first day of slaving"<sup>20</sup>

Van de Ruit's novels align themselves most complacently with a traditionally accepted discourse on fagging. Shortly after their arrival at the school, Spud and his fellows are informed that their week of grace is over and that they are now not only in danger of initiation by older boys, but they are forthwith also required to "slave" for a prefect. Van de Ruit's treatment of this familiar motif is largely stereotypical, especially in terms of the services required of the fags.

Although Spud's chores begin very early in the morning at 06:20, and end extremely late at night, at 20:45, they consist of much the same tasks that would have been required of Tom Brown at Rugby: cleaning the prefect's study and shoes, as well as the punctual preparation of tea and toast. (Spud's fagging duties do, however, extend beyond the norm during Earthworm's final examinations – Spud is woken up in the middle of the night and required to "remake [Earthworm's] bed and talk to him until he dropped off to sleep" (p. 357).) In keeping with the norm, Spud's assigned prefect, nicknamed Earthworm, also exercises his right to chastise Spud for alleged slackness by giving him "finger-tongs" with the blackboard duster, during which procedure Spud "defiantly stared into Earthworm's beady little eyes" (p. 52).

Despite the injustice of the treatment by their masters, the fags are well aware that it is regarded as "immoral to tell on another boy or admit to being bullied or initiated" (p. 27). Indeed, this particular construction, apart from the tongue-in-cheek intensity of the term *immoral*, seems to be identical to the one found in historical boys'

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20 p. 28.

school stories. As young Teddy Lester explains to the Japanese new boy in *His first term* (Finnemore, 1953:13):

'Grin and bear it,' said Teddy. 'What can he do?'  
'It is not allowed, then, to make complaint to a master?' said Ito.  
'Impossible,' said Teddy earnestly; 'Quite impossible my dear fellow!'

Van de Ruit's treatment of the motif does, however, deviate somewhat from the previous model in that there are no dramatic fagging wars or public displays of insubordination. Instead, Spud's rebellion takes a much more subtle and devious form, whereby he succeeds in making the prefect thoroughly ashamed of his own unwarranted cruelty towards his fag. Once Earthworm apologises humbly to him, Spud considers himself the uncontested winner of the battle of the wills and launches himself into his fagging duties with renewed interest and vigour. Later, Spud unexpectedly reaps the benefit of his labours: Earthworm rescues him from a "bogwashing" (p. 191). Although Earthworm's interference is arguably due to a degree of self-interest, he has evidently assumed the role of protector over his "slave", a circumstance which features in traditional boys' school stories as justification for the fagging system.<sup>21</sup>

## **7. Peripheral characters<sup>22</sup> – "There are maniacs in this place"**

### **7.1 Other schoolboys**

Pike and his sidekicks, Devries and Emberton, feature prominently throughout the novels as disreputable bullies, and their frequent cruel attacks on younger boys demonstrate a characteristic vindictiveness similar to that displayed by the ignoble bullies of traditional boys' school stories. Pike not only exhibits the brutality and insensitivity typical of school bullies, but Van de Ruit adds to his other vices a distinctly unsavoury "lavatorial" sense of humour. Hence, he is frequently described as enjoying administering bogwashes and

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21 As Bristow (1991:81) notes, "the small friend system was not so utterly bad [...] there were many noble friendships between big and little boys".

22 In traditional school stories, teachers often feature on the "outer periphery of a circle of friendships and enmities" (Cullingford, 1998:40). The same may be said of other "peripheral" characters (such as prefects and bullies) who serve to hold the reader's interest as possible sources of identification and carry the narrative forward.

generally exhibiting insalubrious, animal behaviour. Perhaps the most frightening, and extremely disturbing aspect of Pike's personality comes to light in a psychopathic attack on Spud with a knife during which he displays unmistakable tendencies to erotic sadism (p. 355).

In direct contrast to Pike's brutality and violence is Julian's sensitive, musical personality. Van de Ruit often uses Julian's effeminate antics to ease the tension created by more serious episodes in the narrative. In this sense, the following episode which occurs directly after the umpteenth defeat of the under 14D-rugby team, is typical (p. 210).

Julian lined up the Crazy Eight and beat us with his pink fly swatter. He said the state of our dormitory was deplorable. After each stroke with the swatter he squealed with delight and danced around like a fairy. Bert would then let loose a booming laugh and clap his hands like a loon. The swatter wasn't sore at all, but everybody pretended to flinch in agony in case he selected a more serious weapon.

Van de Ruit's most archetypal depiction of the ideal schoolboy seems to find expression in the characterisation of Luthuli, the Head of House. Throughout the novels, illustrations of Luthuli's insight, wisdom and inherent strength of character not only single him out as a principled leader, but also cause Spud to respect these attributes and view him as a role model. Furthermore, a significant portion of the political comment in the novel centres on Luthuli (said to be the grandson of the famed Albert Luthuli) and the discussions held during the African Affairs meetings.<sup>23</sup> It may perhaps be argued that Van de Ruit's highly favourable representation of this character stems from an attempt at political correctness in an otherwise somewhat discriminatory narrative.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Spud's personal observations and association with the liberal African Affairs society cause him to express his desire to become a "freedom fighter" (p. 145). In terms of South African youth literature, a comparison of Van de Ruit's novels with the politically contentious school books written by Lawrence Bransby, *Down street* (1989) and *Homeward bound* (1990) may be useful in the exploration of the development and representation of divergent discourses of racism in South African school fiction, but such a discussion fell beyond the scope of this article.

24 The novels have a perhaps deliberately sketchy political backdrop, and a large number of explicit and implied social and racial comments permeate the books. The relevance of various discourses of racism in the narrative as a whole is not discounted, but these discourses are not explored in detail in this study

## 7.2 Teachers

Van de Ruit's particular construction (and to some extent reconstruction) of boyhood, presents vastly varying images of teachers, ranging from the stereotypically mundane to the extraordinarily bizarre. All of these are viewed from Spud's subjective perspective. These characters range from the apparently beautiful drama teacher (significantly, and yet ironically, nicknamed Eve),<sup>25</sup> who has "six rings in her ears and one in her nose" (p. 19), to Crispo, the gentle, yet slightly odd, history teacher,<sup>26</sup> who is (quite predictably) "wickedly old" (p. 15) and is a World War II veteran.

The school is thus populated with an appealing variety of extreme personalities, each with significantly divergent teaching styles. For example, mean, thin-lipped Mr Sykes's humdrum approach to alge-

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because, as Pinsent (2005:14) indicates, before the 1950s, most school books contain "very little social criticism" (books from before the 1950s form the basis of comparison in this study), partly because the elitist nature of the British public school system left very few possibilities for the exploration of racism. In terms of traditional British boys' school stories, therefore, the exposition of various discourses of racism is practically without precedent.

- 25 Weber and Mitchell (1995:2) question the significance of the traditional association of the apple with female teachers, particularly because it was supposedly an apple that was offered to Eve before the fall of humankind.

And what about the apple? What are we to make of that multilayered signifier that has been used to evoke the temptation of Eve – woman as weak-willed, woman as temptress or seductress, woman as betrayer. [...] What did Eve find so tempting about the apple in the first place? The power of knowledge? The forbidden? Quenching the thirst of curiosity? Has the knowledge of right and wrong something to do with teacher?

Their questions are particularly thought-provoking when applied to the description of Spud's drama teacher (called "Eve" throughout the novel) who is evidently frustrated in her marriage to Sparerib and who subsequently initiates and, for a considerable period of time, maintains a "non-platonic relationship" (Van de Ruit, 2007:292) with Rambo.

- 26 Despite his advanced years and apparent hearing problem, Mr Crispo's history lessons are not stereotypically boring. On the contrary, his passion for his subject does arouse some interest from the students. A particularly telling description of one of his lessons illustrates his personal (and clearly biased) obsession with his subject.

[Mr Crispo] showed us a black and white movie on the Battle of Britain. At one stage during the movie a German aircraft was shot down. As it crashed down to earth with a plume of smoke pouring from its tail, Crispo leapt up, thumped the table with his fist, and shouted, 'Die, you Jerry bastard, die!' As the plane exploded Crispo punched the air with delight and grinned triumphantly as if he'd downed the plane himself.

bra is contrasted with Eve's interactive and somewhat revolutionary methods which, though admittedly successful at times, frequently have disastrous results (p. 27).

Eve (Mrs Sparerib) made us do the death scene from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. She chose me to be the victim who is torn apart by the gang of crazed youths. She gave me an old T-shirt to wear and told the group that the shirt was a metaphor for my body. After [my] being kicked in the ribs and badly roughed up, it soon became apparent that nobody knew what a metaphor was.

Eve's liberal and broadminded approach is about as different from her husband's as it is possible to be. Whereas she is depicted as a promoter of open-mindedness, Sparerib (Spud's housemaster) is described from the first in terms largely reminiscent of the typically narrow-minded and notorious authoritarian figure commonly found in boys' school stories. Not only do his rather unfortunate physical features<sup>27</sup> make him look "wickedly fearsome" (p. 10), but his very first speech contains a ludicrously mixed list of alternately serious and trivial offences, thus suggesting a severe intolerance of even the mildest display of insubordination (p. 11).

He [Sparerib] announced his seven commandments with a flourish of his cane:

- '1. Thou shalt not disobey those in authority.
2. Thou shalt not behave in a depraved fashion.
3. Thou shalt not tease my cat. [...]
4. Thou shalt not waste toilet paper.
5. Thou shalt not play with yourself (or others) after lights out.
6. Thou shalt not go night swimming.
7. Thou shalt not play darts.' (A bit strange considering the lack of a dartboard.)

Furthermore, in a renewed attempt at assuming his contested authority over the intrepid Crazy Eight in *Spud II*, Sparerib threatens the boys with physical punishments by rolling up his shirt sleeve and showing them his bicep. "Mad Dog then pulled up his sleeve and

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27 Spud describes Mr Wilson, alias Sparerib, thus (p. 10):

He has big, bulging eyes (one of which is squint) and a shoulder that looks like something's taken a huge bite out of it. He speaks in a rasping voice through clenched yellow teeth and despite his small size he looks wickedly fearsome.

showed Sparerib *his* bicep. Sparerib glared at Mad Dog with his wonky eye until Mad Dog put his bicep away." (Van de Ruit, 2007: 10.) Had the same reaction come from Rambo, it may well have constituted a public and intentional challenge of Sparerib's authority. However, coming from the thoughtless and, in some ways, naïve Mad Dog, it serves, rather, to highlight the inappropriate immaturity of Sparerib's almost childish approach.

In *Spud II*, however, Spud witnesses a very different side of Sparerib's nature shortly after the confirmation of Eve's infidelity. In this episode, the housemaster is shown to be a broken man, a man stripped of faith and hope, a man "groaning like an animal in pain" (Van de Ruit, 2007:333). In this particularly moving scene, Sparerib is represented, not as a ruthless disciplinarian, but as an emotionally vulnerable character, fully deserving of Spud's sympathy. By depicting the essentially susceptible side of Sparerib's character, Van de Ruit seems to be suggesting an alternative construction to that of the housemaster as a self-sufficient, thick-skinned and, apparently, unassailable martinet. His description tends, rather, to highlight the character's intrinsic and inescapable humanness, a trait which often fails to penetrate the frequently over-simplified images that have become almost synonymous with the fictional housemasters of traditional boys' school stories.

### **7.3 The headmaster – "Staring down the barrel of a loaded Glock"<sup>28</sup>**

Van de Ruit's most archetypal character is the headmaster, Glockensheel, (un)affectionately referred to as "the Glock", who is frequently seen hurrying around the school with "his academic gown blowing out like he was walking through a hurricane" (p. 175). The juxtaposition of his actual surname, indicative of an innocuous musical instrument, and his nickname, referring to a notorious kind of firearm,<sup>29</sup> as suggested in the pun quoted in the heading above, is suggestive – he is ultimately not very effective, despite the apparent threat he poses.

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28 Van de Ruit (2007:283).

29 The firearm manufacturer, Gaston Glock, created the Glock 17 for the Austrian army in the early 1980s. This 9mm, semi-automatic pistol achieved notoriety in action movies such as *Die hard 2: die harder* (1990) in which the entirely fictional "Glock 7" was said to pass through security x-ray machines undetected (Wikipedia, 2008).



During his very first speech, the Glock's repeated reference to the school as an "institution" and the boys as "wayward subjects"<sup>30</sup> distinctly aligns him with the verbose autocrat so frequently portrayed in boys' literature.

Furthermore, in *Spud II* when the protagonist eventually experiences "being on the wrong side of the *Hitler* that runs our school" (Van de Ruit, 2007:282; emphasis – JR), the headmaster's treatment of the perpetrators is similarly typical (Van de Ruit, 2007:283).

The Glock gave us a twenty-minute screaming to. My legs were shaking terribly and I couldn't look at his face. He kept banging the table with his fist and ranting on about 'silly season'<sup>31</sup> and what our vile behaviour has done to the school's fine reputation.

The salient concerns expressed during the Glock's outburst also suggest that his perception of his duties as headmaster emanates not so much from the discourse which propagates the assumption of *in loco parentis* towards the student in the absence of the parent, as from his sense of obligation to uphold his school's status. At no point is he described as pointing out to the boys the particular personal evils that their conduct could expose them to, nor the probable repercussions of the apparently lawless lifestyle they have adopted. He seems, instead, to be far more concerned with the dreadful stain they have left on the school's reputation. Thus he considers their immediate removal (temporary or permanent) from the institution as the only conceivable solution to the problem.

#### 7.4 The Guv – "Our raving mad teacher"<sup>32</sup>

It is, in a sense, ironic that of all the teachers that the protagonist comes into contact with, the one who takes his role of *in loco parentis* towards Spud most seriously, is the unashamedly mad, though universally well-liked English teacher, Mr Edly, generally referred to as the Guv. Throughout the narrative, The Guv's extraordinary teaching and coaching exploits function as a welcome

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30 The idea of the school as an institution for the rehabilitation of "wayward subjects" brings to mind Foucault's *Discipline and punish* (1977).

31 In *Spud I*, the Glock says that "the third term is traditionally known as the 'silly season'. He went on to say that for the last five years at least one boy has been expelled during the dreaded third term" (p. 272).

32 p. 173.

source of comic relief to counterbalance Spud's (frequently over-rated) teenage troubles.

During their very first English class, The Guv delights the boys with a thorough exhibition of his inimitable *modus operandi* when he unexpectedly throws a pile of Henry James novels out of the window, calling the author "a boring faggot".<sup>33</sup> We all applauded, he bowed and then told us to get lost" (p. 13). Furthermore, The Guv's disregard for convention also finds expression in his preferred methods of punishment. Although we never witness The Guv resorting to corporal punishment, which in itself constitutes a change, his way of dealing with a guilty perpetrator has its own twisted and cruel aspect. For example, when The Guv discovers that Fatty has failed to adequately prepare for the lesson, he punishes him in a most unusual way: although considering the gluttonous Fatty's defining weakness, the chosen penalty seems oddly appropriate (p. 305).

The Guv lambasted Fatty in French (or what sounded like French) and he ordered our obese friend to eat his copy of the short story. It took about four seconds for poor Fatty to realise that The Guv was being deadly serious and about 1004 seconds for Fatty to devour twenty-five pages of print.

It would appear from this extract that The Guv is consciously dealing with Fatty according to his folly, a construction of discipline which, though admittedly effective at times, remains, in essence, a risky approach.

That The Guv regards Spud with almost paternal affection, is evident from his parting words near the end of the first book, shortly after Gecko's funeral (p. 385).

He pulled me close and embraced me, saying, 'You're almost a son to me, old boy. You'll get over this, you know, and you'll be a greater man for it.' Then he thumped me on the back and said, 'Do take care of yourself and remember, when in doubt – keep reading. A book will never die on you.'

This enigmatic piece of advice is quite representative of the somewhat dubious counsel The Guv offers Spud throughout the narrative.

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33 The portrayal of The Guv's teaching style, as well as the influence he exercises over Spud's literary development, is reminiscent of *The dead poet's society* (1989), a film which is, like *The diary of Adrian Mole*, mentioned in the text (Van de Ruit, 2007:304).

In fact, as previously noted, The Guv's recommendations are occasionally not merely ambivalent, but subversive in that they propagate an alternative discourse of dishonesty that views deceit and duplicity as a justifiable means to an (admittedly uncertain) end.

Given his tendency to voice disturbingly subversive opinions, The Guv is perhaps unqualified to assume a parental role towards Spud, especially considering that Spud is in a formative stage of his life during which he must "respond to the modes of masculinity" (Medalie, 2000:42) offered to him. Nevertheless, such reflections are discounted by the consideration that Spud's natural father's bizarre and frequently petty criminal behaviour, where it does not surpass, at least rivals, The Guv's apparent eccentricity in terms of discursive dissention.

## **8. Conclusion – "Welcome to paradise lost"**

According to Pinsent (2005:18), "morality has been a very important theme of the school story from its beginnings". She clarifies her assertion by noting that in this particular genre,

... the qualities which make for good relationships in a small community, such as leadership, friendliness, and concern for others, are inevitably singled out for praise, while those which could lead to the breakdown of relationships, such as dishonesty, telling tales, and snobbery, are censured, either implicitly or explicitly (Pinsent, 2005:18).

She goes on to say that in recent school fiction "this standard of values is certainly not abandoned" (Pinsent, 2005:18).

While this statement may be true for other recent publications in the genre, it is certainly not applicable to Van de Ruit's novels. By contrast, the findings of this study indicate that practically all the discourses and conventions endorsed by traditional boys' school stories are to some extent called into question by the representation of alternative discursive structures. Not only is the discourse of honesty juxtaposed with a substitute discourse that commends corruption, but the generally uncontested discourse of obedience (or more particularly, the desire to do right) is subverted, among the boys at least, by a radical ideological framework that praises disobedience as a necessary vindication of courage (p. 83). Throughout the narrative, Spud finds it difficult to deal with the expectations of this unconventional discourse, as his apparent need to prove his bravery to his peer group through insubordination requires that he forfeit his moral courage which, in turn, urges him to do otherwise.

Furthermore, while some of the other discourses such as those relating to the perceptions of corporal punishment, acceptable teaching practice, fagging and the correlation between sport and war are not completely subverted, they are certainly contested. Moreover, Van de Ruit's entertaining style provides an essentially non-threatening platform for these previously accepted discourses to be identified and reassessed. In this sense, Van de Ruit's representations of female characters, as well as the personal development of the protagonists in the third instalment, could prove a fascinating and enlightening study.

During their first interview, The Guv studies Spud closely over the top of his old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses and says, "So, Milton, [...] welcome to paradise lost" (p. 13). While this is evidently intended as wordplay on Spud's literary surname, the image it evokes is subtly significant. As the British public school system, along with its salient discourses was, at some point in history, deemed to be the ideal educational system – a perception self-evident in the South African attempt to emulate it – one may, to a certain extent, view it as a metaphorical (albeit historical) paradise.<sup>34</sup> As Hughes (1971: 231) unabashedly puts it, "What substitute for it is there, amongst any nation under the sun? What would you like to see take its place?"

Nevertheless, through the systematic subversion of the British model's defining discourses, Van de Ruit's fictional representation of Spud's school experience succeeds in depicting the supposed ideal as all but completely lost among the myriad of alternative discourses proposed. For Spud, at least, the paradisiacal construction of boyhood so celebrated in the traditional school fiction of the past, with its clearly defined principles and uncontested morals, is utterly and irrevocably lost. Instead, he finds himself in a kind of fallen paradise, an unfamiliar realm full of contradictory and confusing discourses which vie for his attention.

Yet, amidst the uncertainty, he is reminded of the advantages of the hypothetical discourse of free moral agency within which he can function. It is Mr Crispo who gives him the vital directive (p. 121): "Remember, boy, God gave us the greatest gift of all. Not love, health, or beauty, not even life. But choice. God's greatest gift is

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34 The ideas suggested in footnote 25 concerning Eve's ambiguous role as tempted and temptress are significant in this regard.

choice.” Ironically, it is Spud himself who challenges even this discourse when he expresses his opinion that “the man upstairs” (Van de Ruit, 2007:133) “often doesn’t give us a choice. He deals the cards and we play them” (p. 389). However, the mythos of a vulnerable paradise lingers: the choice lies in how we decide to play the cards we are dealt.

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### **Key concepts:**

imperial construction of boyhood  
South African school story  
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*Spud: the madness continues*  
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traditional school ethic  
Van de Ruit, John

**Kernbegrippe:**

Britse skoolverhale vir seuns, tradisionele  
imperiale konstruksie van seunsjare

skooletos, tradisionele

*Spud: a wickedly funny novel*

*Spud: the madness continues*

Suid-Afrikaanse skoolverhaal

Van de Ruit, John

