After the peaceful revolution in South Africa, beginning with the changeover of power in 1989 (F. W. de Klerk became president after P. W. Botha) and the release of ANC leader Nelson Mandela in 1990, many South Africans were sceptical about the position of the Afrikaans language in the future. In fact, many observers inside and outside South Africa were sure about the inevitable tendency to marginalize Afrikaans in South African society. To a certain extent time has proved them right. In the educational field Afrikaans was forced to clip its wings. Afrikaans as an educational language in the universities today has maintained part of its status, but on a very reduced basis. This reduction also applies to political life and to the administration of justice. The reason for this phenomenon is obvious. A language to bridge the communication gap between South Africans of different descent had to be found. This bridge is English.

However, to a large extent the prophets of the decline of Afrikaans have been proven wrong. This has to do with a surprising awareness of the special quality of being an Afrikaans-speaking South African. Afrikaans has become part of the search of South Africans for something one could describe as a South African identity. Perhaps one could even say that Afrikaans is the reason why South Africa has not become a second Australia or New Zealand. The difference lies in the fact that English does not reign supreme and that Afrikaans is a European alternative with African features.

From the start of the emancipation movement of the language in 1875 in Paarl (former Cape Province), Afrikaans had to fulfil a na-
tional task. Literature in Afrikaans was supposed to be a vehicle for nation building, Afrikaans itself being a new language compared with Dutch, a new language that was a symbol of national identity. This idea was consolidated in the years of reconstruction after the second Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902). It would, however, give only a partial image of the development of literature prose, poetry and theatre in Afrikaans, if this literature were presented as a monolith, as an obedient reflection of social aims and moral tasks in favour of a solid Afrikaner society.

To a greater or lesser extent there has always been a margin between social expectations of literature in South Africa and the reality of this literature. Literary critics in South Africa emphasized the fundamental change in the lyrical language, in the identity of the lyrical subject during the 1940s and the fundamental opposition of Afrikaans prose to the political status quo by the generation of the Sestigers – authors like André Brink, Abraham H. de Vries and Etienne Leroux.

Contemporary production of Afrikaans literature proves that Afrikaans is very much still alive. Without wishing to create an image of competition within the body of South African literature, it seems valid to argue that Afrikaans literature is among the most interesting literature being produced in South Africa today. We are witnesses to an explosion of creativity. Afrikaans literature has turned out to have a surprising vitality.²

In terms of crime fiction production, there has been a number of very interesting recent works. Chris Moolman with Sweepslag (1996), Operasie Ché (1997), Die asem van Ghaddafi (1998) and Komplot (2000) is an example of how an author can write James Bond-like suspense novels that still maintain an element of historical comment. In all these detective stories the characters’ names are recognizable variations on the names of living politicians and other VIPs. Therefore the stories read like inside information about things that have never reached the news. Another popular author is Deon Meyer with his novels Feniks and Orion. Orion (2000) for example, is a story about

² This applies to all literary genres. The stress lies on prose. Within Afrikaans prose there is a particular interest in the detective novel, autobiographical writings and fairy tales.