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When the Number is up
Jonny Steinberg's latest book pitches the reader into the murky world of SA's prison gangs by focusing on the life of one man. Khadija Magardie does time with the author

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FOR anyone who has lived on the Cape Flats, the word *bandiet* warrants no explanation. Nor for the good readers safe in the suburbs who un-crackle their broadsheets after work, to take in yet another shooting in Bonteheuwel or Manenberg. But where violence is part of the social fabric the gangster is less the fiend than he is the anti-hero: the wielder of the gun and the provider of the food parcel. A Faust with a human face. Someone who rapes, stabs, shoots and kills with one hand, and pays the doctor's bills for the old woman down the street with the other.

Giving crime and criminality a human face is the rationale behind author and journalist Jonny Steinberg's latest book, *The Number*. The prison gangs, the subject of the book, are a world of human beings and to understand crime, you need to understand the lives and circumstances of the people in their ranks.

The Number is a life story account of Magadien Wentzel — and, by proxy, of the lives of thousands like him who bear the mark of Cain bestowed on them by prison life. It is about the history of prison gangs: what has shaped them, what has changed them, and where they are going. Because, writes Steinberg, crime too has a history and a future. And by understanding this history, it

will show "why generations of young black men lived violent lives under apartheid, and why generations more will live violently under democracy".

By virtue of its subject matter, The Number will not be a popular book. It is a documentary about the world of crime. This in a country where most people are fed up with crime, and have little sympathy for the criminal, preferring, it is argued, to see anti-social behaviour as some sort of aberration which has no context.

But as with his previous book, *Midlands*, which took the prestigious Sunday Times Alan Paton Award for Non-fiction in 2003, the author has taken what's thought to be an open and shut subject and by its treatment given it resonance. This is Steinberg's trademark. He does not just dissect the subject, he gives it new dimensions and a human face.

"I can't think of anything good I've ever read that wasn't told through one person's eyes," says Steinberg.

He met Wentzel, the subject of the book, while on assignment for Benetton's *Colours* magazine in 2002. His original brief was to write about Pollsmoor, as part of a special edition on the subject for the magazine.

A journalist who had made a name for himself on the crime and justice beats in the local press, Steinberg was introduced to several inmates to interview for his article, which was about the steel and concrete mesh that is Pollsmoor and not about the life stories that put the inmates there.

Wentzel was one of his subjects. But "this is a history of a peculiar kind", writes Steinberg of the subject. When the author met him, Wentzel was known as William Steenkamp, a high-ranking member of the 28s gang. A string of aliases is just one of several facets to the personality of the man who shapes the book.

For the reader who has not grown up in a black or coloured neighbourhood somewhere in South Africa and has never heard terms like *ndota* (old gangster) or *vuil mpata* (uninitiated prisoner), there is an explanatory history of the

traditions and mythology of the prison gangs; in particular, the story of Mzuzephi "Nongoloza" Mathebula, a 19th-century outlaw and bandit regarded as the father of the prison number gangs. From *The Number*, one is introduced to the rituals of the gangs as practised by the *vleis en bloed*, or traditional gangsters schooled in the old ways. Here one learns about the three camps: the 26s, the 27s and the 28s, "each with their self-made philosophies of banditry and their collectively assigned roles.

"The 26s accumulate wealth to be distributed among all three camps. The 28s fight on behalf of all three camps for better conditions for inmates. The 27s are the guarantor of gang law. They were to keep the peace between the three camps, and when blood is spilled they spill blood in turn."

The history that Steinberg provides gives credence to the theory that the existence of number gangs gave a sense of order to South African prisons in the 1970s and 1980s.

But this is Magadien Wentzel's story. It is a story peppered with names we all know: Victor Verster, Pollsmoor, Goedemoed — beeps on the Correctional Services radar — but "home away from home" for the likes of Wentzel. A man with an urgent need to belong somewhere since his mother put him into foster care, tossed him from family to family, woman to woman and, as he made his way inside prison, from camp to camp.

Arrival at a new prison was always the same. You were surrounded by inmates who asked you: "Who are you?" The answer, how well you could *sabela* or speak prison language, determined your fate.

There are those who would ask what Steinberg, a white boy from Johannesburg, could know about The Number. Or about coloured society. Then there are some apparent generalisations that would be difficult to quantify. Like that, within the communities on the Cape Flats, "there are many young men who have sought a prison sentence in order to prepare themselves for life on the streets".

A suggestion that sits uncomfortably — conjuring up images of coloured boys who commit crimes with the burning ambition to be locked up and join a gang as a future investment.

The book is not a shocking exposé of the horror of bloodthirsty gangsters running rampant inside taxpayer-funded jails, nor does it put a gloss on the history of South Africa's prison gangs.

In the six months of researching his book, Steinberg cultivated an unlikely,

almost symbiotic, relationship with his subject. The writer needed the story, the gangster wanted to tell it.

"What helped is that he desperately wanted a listener, someone to understand his life," says Steinberg of Wentzel, whom he met nine months before Wentzel was due for release from Pollsmoor.

The book is the result of hours of recorded conversations in Wentzel's cell, where the writer was the priest, and the gangster in the confessional.

And so it was that the white Jewish boy from Johannesburg and the coloured Muslim gangster from the Cape Flats became friends, but not quite.

"I was aware, says Steinberg, "that I was writing a book about a man in relation to me, it was about his relationship to me, not to the rest of the world. It's still an outsiders's account."

The book is not just Wentzel's memoir, it is the history of a social phenomenon. What one begins to understand when reading it is that, despite what the politicians think and even what public sentiment might be, the solution to crime and criminality can never be simply "locking the door and throwing away the key".

Prisons are as on the fringe of social consciousness as they are on the fringe of urban planning maps when cities are designed. Many people look on them with wariness, but few know what goes on behind their walls.

And the relationship between writer and subject could not be more fraught with inequalities.

Both Steinberg and Wentzel knew that when the day ended and the tape recorder

was packed away, one of them was going to his luxury hotel, the other to his prison cell.

Steinberg recalls a time, towards the end of his interview sessions, when the fault line exposed itself. Wentzel, no doubt frustrated with the thoughts burning in his mind about Steinberg's life beyond Pollsmoor's walls, called the writer from prison, sarcastically asking him to bring, on the next visit, some of the nice food he was eating in his hotel. The author, stung by the words, admits in the book that he then felt, perhaps as never before, betrayed. Though constantly aware that their "friendship" was a commercial transaction more than anything else, he still believed Wentzel didn't see him as only a potential cash cow.

Wentzel, who was shown drafts of the manuscript by Steinberg throughout the writing process, has said he is happy with the book, and the way in which it portrays his life. He has given several media interviews since its release, describing the book as being "long overdue".

But he is caustic about what he describes as a legion of researchers and "experts" who have dissected the Number with little first-hand accounts from its members. He says this book is about "the reality, not the perception".

The Number styles itself as being about changing perceptions. Wentzel complains to the author about how the purity of the Number, which once served a purpose of maintaining a pecking order behind bars, has been eroded. A change in the prison landscape which began in the mid-1990s, when "the masters of Cape Town's criminal economy had captured the world of the Number and made it their own".

There are drug lords who claim they are Number generals even when they are not, and who use half-baked ideas borrowed from the Number to garner "street cred" for themselves on the outside.

It is perhaps at this point that one feels one's moral compass shift. In a peculiar way, you feel sad that the Number is being eroded as the system, as brutal as it was, seemed to work. When you read about the breakdown of the Number, of the porous boundary that separates inside and outside of prison life, you almost want the centre to hold and the Number to remain pure.

But Steinberg has written a book about the life of one man — whose prison record meant that he could never break free of the benevolent arms of the Number — and, by extension, the story of the lives of thousands like him who continue to be

sausage-machined through the flawed prison system in South Africa.

For Magadien Wentzel, The Number has been cathartic. "It gave me a chance to unload my baggage, to rectify my mistakes: it helped me to heal."

•The Number is published by Jonathan Ball, R164
