

Book Reviews

***Submerged* by Louis Wiid: A Review**

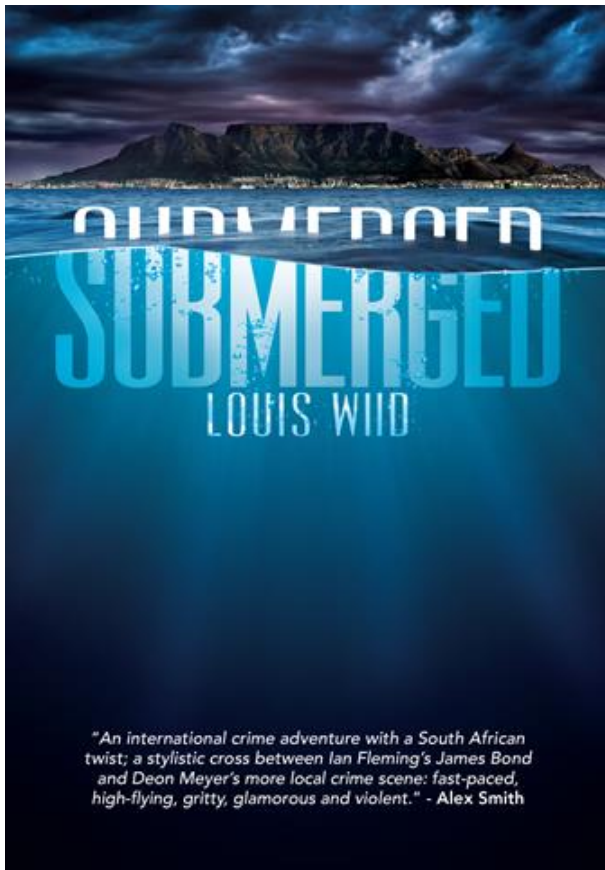
***Submerged* by Louis Wiid**

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428 pages

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R220



Submerged, the debut novel of South African novelist Louis Wiid, is an enthralling look into the world of international organised crime, filled with violence, addiction, sex and corruption. The novel explores the darkness of human nature in a cutthroat corporate setting, where people are used as pawns in international power games, and self-

worth is based on one's position in the corporate hierarchy and the size of annual bonuses. The characters are doing what needs to be done in order to survive the shadowy world that they inhabit, and they numb themselves with substances to get through it. The first few chapters introduce Franklin Benjamin who is a coloured

gangster living in Cape Town, trapped in his life of crime and brutal violence. While the authentic voice of Cape Town is never fully present in these early sections, and the vernacular in the dialogue often comes across as awkward and forced, the world is still one that begs exploration. Franklin is an intriguing character, a gangster with a tragic past that immediately makes his character striking and memorable. He jumps off the page, an early sign of the author's skill of infusing real humanity into his often-larger-than-life characters. Franklin is at odds with the leader of the gang, Eldon, who had been financing Franklin's soccer training before Franklin suffered an accident that ended his sporting career before it began. These chapters offer a rare glimpse into life on the Cape Flats from a South African novelist, a subject that deserves to be reflected in fiction more often. It was refreshing to see the dynamic setting of the Cape Flats explored with a cast of colourful and multidimensional characters.

But, sadly, this captivating setup disappears for most of the novel. Rather than creating an intriguing backdrop for what follows, and energising the rest of the narrative, this early introduction to life on the Cape Flats only frustrated this reader, seeming so disconnected from the lives of two wealthy, worldly and white characters that occupy the central focus of the narrative, who seemed to mostly fall into trouble of their own making rather than facing the real danger that Franklin does. While it provides for a satisfying ending once the characters return to Cape Town, the lack of focus on Franklin until the end of the read makes him too peripheral in a way that does not do justice to the character. The gritty realism introduced in these early sections is tantalizing, but it is undercut by the less engaging depictions of the other settings and characters.

Leon Jacobs and Sophia Papov, the two characters who are the main focus of the novel, are often painfully uninspiring as they stumble through their 20s under the thumb of Sophia's malevolent father, Bogdan Papov, a Russian billionaire and crime lord. The main characters are initially young and impulsive, seemingly directionless and motivated only by their whims as they suffer through their indecision and angst. While Sophia's struggles with mental illness and drug abuse are interesting and important topics to explore, these struggles do little to elevate her character. Clearer motivations for these characters and a bit more agency from both would have made them easier to root for.

Leon and Sophia meet when Leon travels to Jameel in Egypt and works as a diving instructor. After Sophia suffers a near-death experience on one of her dives, Leon rescues her and they form an intimate relationship. The diving incident is meant to highlight Sophia's self-destructive and reckless character, and both Leon and Sophia feed off the ennui of each other. Leon is nothing more than a drifter, with very little motivation in the novel other than a vague goal of finding himself, and thus Sophia's enigmatic presence is enough to draw him to London where she offers to help him find a job. Sophia is a rebel trying to break free of the control of her father, a man who, in the classic villainous trope, is implicated in the death of her mother. It is inferred that Leon might be able to rescue her from her descent into the darkness of her mind and her past in the same way that he rescued her when she descended into the waters of Jameel.

These characters delve deeper into self-destruction for the majority of the first part of the novel, despite their intentions to better themselves. Sophia's role is often relegated to that of a plot device, firstly to get Leon to London where the main thrust of the

narrative takes place, and then forming a link between the male characters through their mutual hatred of Papov in order to propel the narrative into its final showdown. Leon doesn't seem to make many choices of his own, and it is unclear why he is even hired at the financial firm where he works in London or how he keeps his job despite coming off as unsuited for it. Sophia, at the start and throughout most of the narrative, is shown to be in need of Leon or another male's rescue, and both Leon and Sophia are cast into cliché roles of scrappy hero and damsel in distress. But despite these initially limiting roles, the characters begin to develop much more depth towards the end of the text, and there are redeeming moments that justify spending so much time developing these two characters, especially once Franklin is reintroduced at the climax of the novel.

The main focus of the narrative is the period where Leon works at Papov's corporation, PapovBank, in London. The section draws the reader in and is written in a compelling, taut style. The other employees at PapovBank, Isabella, McHenry and Wilkinson, are shown to be working on secret, high-stakes deals and broadly represent cutthroat and backstabbing characters who will sacrifice anything to get the job done. Leon is pushed to his limits to become a company man just like the rest of these characters, and the evolution of his character is interesting to follow. He becomes damaged, tainted and darker. Simultaneously, Sophia begins to unravel, losing all semblance of the innocence that she seemed to have at the start of the novel. The author shows that he is willing to take risks with his narrative, and it is rewarding for the reader. These moments and the thrilling ending were evidence that *Submerged* is a worthwhile read for any fans of action-packed corporate thrillers.

The novel takes some very unexpected turns, with characters making decisions that cannot be guessed from the start. This adds to the complexity of the narrative and makes the novel much more appealing in the second half, despite the constant nagging feeling that there is too little narrative focus.

There were some clear signs that Wiid is still a developing novelist. The writing style is often perfunctory, and there is a lot of “as you know...” writing interspersed in the narrative as the author demonstrates his research into the various subjects covered in the text. The information often feels extraneous to the story being told and detracts from the flow, robbing many potentially exciting moments of their impact. This is evident when lengthy descriptions of Sophia's nitrogen narcosis during her ill-fated dive detract from the danger and thrill of the moment. Nevertheless, the writing style greatly improves later where the writing is tighter and more powerful. The action scenes later in the narrative are much more impactful because of this.

There are also some problematic tendencies in the novel, such as the tired trope of making the early villain, Eldon, an ostensibly queer character merely for the ‘othering’ effect this creates rather than as a way to make him more interesting – a trope lazily repeated with Sophia's father Papov later in the text. The villains, generally, are one-dimensional caricatures who offer little intrigue; they are not even interesting enough for the reader to hate them, but they are merely an annoyance in the text.

The only villain with some complexity is Papov's henchman, Sinovich, but his characterisation is often too erratic to make him a round character. Despite the sophisticated tone of the writing and the sensitive way it often deals with substance abuse and

mental health issues, the reliance on overused tropes is grating to a modern reader, even for the genre of crime thriller. There is an unfortunate tendency to fall into archaic depictions of gender, sexuality and race in ways that detract greatly from the story being told, especially for readers sensitive to these issues and those who are accustomed to much more nuanced depictions in modern fiction. More original characterisation would have been appreciated.

Another one of the unfortunate shortcomings is that the complex relationship between Sophia and Leon, so central to the narrative, is only ever elliptically explored. The reader is told that Leon and Sophia have deep conversations and that there was a strong connection between them, but this is never really shown satisfactorily. There is little humour or humanity in their connection, and it seems doubtful that Leon would have gone to such great lengths to follow Sophia or allow himself to be manipulated by her based on their seemingly flimsy bond. Their vacillation between being intimate and being friends is confusing for the reader rather than building on the complexity of their connection. In fact, at one point it is stated that they had not seen each other for many months, even though Sophia was still, to paraphrase Leon, sort of his girlfriend. There are long sections where they do not seem to truly care about one another, despite keeping in touch via emails, and this makes their eventual reconnection much less impactful. It was extremely confusing why Leon would stand idly by while Sophia spiralled almost into obliteration, and why Sophia would allow Leon to become so deeply absorbed into Papov's world of corruption without so much as a warning.

The narrative picks up steam in Part 2, where the characters have reached rock bottom in more ways than one. Leon and Sophia

have compromised much in order to achieve the heights of fame and wealth, and, as is often the case in fiction, they have nowhere to go but down. After tragedy and failure rock both Sophia and Leon's lives, they return to Cape Town to face their demons. There is real character growth here and the novel reaches an interesting conclusion when their worlds collide with Franklin's and the showdown with the villains can take place. The action scenes at the end were well executed and the ending was genuinely surprising and satisfying. In fact, a lot of this reader's expectations were subverted, which is always refreshing.

Overall, Wiid is a welcome and unique voice in South African crime fiction, and his debut novel shows tremendous promise. If he can refine his craft, and focus more on the compelling South African setting like he does in the opening and closing sections of this novel, he will undoubtedly emerge as a highly-respected novelist in this genre.

Submerged is currently available from Jacana Media for the retail price of R220.

Reviewer: Grant Andrews