



BOOKS

Post apartheid chaos prevails

ARE WE THERE YET?

By David Smiedt

University of Queensland Press

YOU can't go too far wrong with a travel book that starts with a joke. After all, reading a book is like a journey — no-one wants bad start.

Of course, Smiedt goes and spoils it a few pages later. After moving from South Africa to Australia with his family, his father gets cancer and returns home to die.

Smiedt was there when he died and then didn't return to South Africa for another 15 years.

As you'd expect, a lot's changed in the years between 1989 and 2003.

After arriving in Johannesburg — a city where you can equip your car with a flame-thrower to deter car-jackers — Smiedt is promptly robbed.

It sparks a long and informative look at the problems 40 per cent unemployment and rampant crime can cause.

Things get slightly better as his trip progresses but 21st century South Africa is still a land of contrasts; from the huge underground mines, shanty towns, grinding poverty and deadly roads (1210 dead over the 2002 Christmas period) to the natural beauty and kindness of many of the people.

And still there remains the shadow of the racial 'logic' of the apartheid system, a system that created inequalities that in some cases are actually getting worse.

Smiedt does a first-rate job of mixing information with humour, creating a sharp and vibrant picture of his former home.

While the result is part travel guide, part history lesson, it's never less than entertaining thanks to a bright and breezy writing style.

South Africa comes across as an interesting and lively place although maybe a little too interesting for those after a peaceful, stress-free life.

— ANTHONY MORRIS

