

Impressions of impressions are caught in a volume of meaning

by Neels Blom

In a faraway country, high up in a remote montane district in a forgotten village, tucked in a dark corner of a sometimes-crowded bar in a small inn, a great work of art is rendered directly onto the wall — an impressionistic suggestion of an impressionistic study of a living thing.

The sketch, in charcoal almost certainly from a pipe smoker's burnt matchsticks, is of a fishing fly that bears a fleeting resemblance to the imago stage of an insect in the mayfly family. Look closely at the ephemeral image on the wall and you'll understand the meaning flyfishers weave into their mythology. It is sparse, frugal even, but precise.

Into this fabric, the flyfishing authors Peter Brigg and Ed Herbst have now added even greater texture with their book, *South African Fishing Flies* (Struik). The authors say the book does not represent an exhaustive list of South African flies, and it is true, it doesn't. A comprehensive volume would be a book such as Bill Hansford-Steele's *Fishing Flies for Africa*, which is a handbook, a tool that you are as likely to find on a fly-tier's bench as Jay Smit's *J-vice*.

Brigg and Herbst wrote (and collected, edited and curated) something very different. You might not find it in the clutter on tying benches, but rather on the shelf above the bench, next to a bottle of the good stuff.

To understand this, consider that for most flyfishers catching a fish is not their main concern. Conning and hooking and landing a fish give purpose to an angler's presence on the water, but the meaning in fishing, as in any human endeavour, is to become part of a story beyond mere existence.

For flyfishers, the point of contact with the fabric of the universe is the fly, though it matters little whether a fish falls for the trickery. What matters is that the angler makes the best presentation possible in that place at that time.

What matters on the water is the story that has begun with the tying of a fly as an imagining of a great event; when a fish does take the fly, the angler is connected to a god.

The authors say also that their book is not a history of fly-tying in SA, but that it is an anthology "of those that by virtue of their innovation and design, materials used and tying techniques, have helped shape and, in some cases, change the thinking on fly-tying in this country".

You'll have to take their word for the history bit, but if you read the book, you'll find it is a history as much as it is an anthology of histories of the many South African flies as they evolved over the past century or so.

One such insightful contribution (recipe included) comes from a pipe-smoking artist known to frequent the fishing environs of a certain forgotten village, cautioning anglers not to substitute water mongoose fibres for the tail of the Zak nymph.

That is something for which your columnist can vouch, having once for a lack of water mongooses substituted black Labrador fibres. That Labrador Zak has yet to trick a trout.

Perhaps the single most revealing aspect of flyfishing is that no one polices flyfishers and their tackle, yet the fiction of flyfishing law prevails collectively and individually in the consciousness of those who pursue the sport. This law begins with the fly.

With South African Fishing Flies, Brigg and Herbst and their contributors help explain how it is that humans live not only in a universe in which objective realities can be confirmed and subjective realities experienced, but that there is a third reality created by the stories that give their lives meaning.