

DARK Video, Peter Church's debut novel, gives a disconcerting slant to local crime fiction. This isn't an excursion to the ganglands of the Cape Flats. No Nigerian druglords in Hillbrow. But there is crime. Online crime in a virtual world just a click away from any South African with access to a computer.

The opening scenes sound all too similar to recent news reports in Cape Town. A student jogging alone in Newlands forest is pulled off the path by three strangers. Both the student and the reader brace themselves for a gang-rape scenario, as the victim is stripped naked. But it doesn't happen. Her attackers disappear, leaving her alone, naked — and untouched.

We soon learn that it's not merely a student prank. And that her saviour is no knight in shining armour. He's in it too. For the money. And even more, for the thrill. He's part of a student group with Internet connections to people prepared to pay high prices for a video showing the unadulterated terror of a naked girl.

Church, with his long career in information technology, is well-qualified to write about the virtual world. UCT alumni will relate to his descriptions of the digs in Rondebosch, where students hang out with their high-tech computers.

I asked him what sparked the idea behind the depravity in *Dark Video*.

"The incredible growth of the video-sharing phenomenon was the light bulb," he answers. "YouTube didn't exist a few years ago. People are fascinated by watching material they were never intended to see. Reality TV shows don't go far enough. A star's private video featured on the Net is guaranteed millions of hits."

The students in *Dark Video* have honed into the market-value of snuff — the

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Afraid of the Dark

A local novel warns online snuff films threaten our children more than ever. By Barbara Erasmus

filming of an actual murder supposedly produced for profit.

The concept hit the headlines with the release of the movie *Snuff* in 1976. *Snuff* was a publicity stunt. A media frenzy started when producer Allan Shackleton claimed that the bloody demise of the heroine was the real thing. There was national hysteria at the prospect and the film grossed millions in the first few weeks.

Although it was exposed as a scam, snuff movies have become an unsubstantiated urban legend. Al Goldstein of *Screw* magazine has for years offered \$1-million to anyone who could produce evidence of a snuff movie released commercially. There have been no takers. There's little incentive to take up the challenge, considering the legal implications and the wholly convincing portrayals of sex and death available to the public in mainstream movies. But that was before the advent of video-sharing channels that give access to a whole new market of

people eager to indulge their fantasies in private.

Church is adamant that a snuff video would never be screened on YouTube. "It would take a top international hacker to bypass the security controls and firewalls that filter out the material posted

there," he explains. But online videos aren't restricted to YouTube. Some sites aren't restricted at all.

One of the sites Church visited when researching *Dark Video* was www.break.com. "Break has a slot called 'Just Submit It,'" he explains. "You can post any video you like on that site with no censorship at all." The administrators then view the videos, deleting poor material

before posting it in various categories on the site. But Church — and anyone else — had easy access to very explicit videos before this filtering process took place.

Church was horrified by some of vicious material he saw.

The story in *Dark Video* doesn't seem too far-fetched to anyone who reads the local newspapers. Research conducted by South Africa's Film and Publication Board in 2006 found that 81% of teenagers

surveyed reported that their friends had pornographic images on their cellphones. We've heard about the queue of guys who took their chances with the girl passed out on booze or drugs at the weekend party. There were parties like these as far back as the '60s. We might have been at them ourselves. And so might our children today.

Technology bombards children in the new millennium with a growing number of choices. Increasingly sophisticated cameras are part of the package in a modern cellphone. Might children not be tempted to record what they see? How much does it stretch the imagination to add a

financial dimension to the equation? Especially if it's big money. The anonymity of the Net is another drawback. How far would you go if the chance arose?

"*Dark Video* is about conscience and the ability to track right and wrong," says Church.

It's a topical thriller with a strong moral message that should get the conversation going among a diverse audience.

● *Dark Video* is published by Struik, R120

