From lonely outback to multicultural cities

Australian crime fiction is as varied as the genre—and as diverse as the country itself.

By Rowena Johns

The crime and mystery section of Australian bookshops has never been more diverse, with writers hailing from every corner of the English-speaking world, especially from the US, UK and Scandinavia (in translation). Amid the wide range of crime sub-genres—"cosy" crime, the urban American "hard-boiled" detective, police procedurals, and psychological or forensic thrillers—it may be surprising to discover that much of Australian crime fiction can be loosely classified under those same categories, albeit influenced by antipodean traditions, such as an ambivalent attitude towards authority and a love of laconic humour.

The environment is also a crucial aspect of
Australian crime fiction. An Australian setting, whether in the bush or the city, helps to shape atmosphere, plot, character and language.

What cannot be denied is that Australian crime fiction competes strongly with the international titles for attention.

Australians today are keen to read about crime on an international scale, but in the colonial era they were preoccupied with dangers at home, in the form of transported convicts, bushrangers, fraudsters using false identities, and other ruthless characters. Public imagination was captured by newspaper reports of crime, and crime fiction soon appeared. *Force and Fraud* (1865) by Ellen Davitt was the first novel to be serialized in the newspapers; the author’s name is preserved in the annual Davitt Awards for crime writing by Australian women. Other early crime writers include Mary Fortune, whose police procedural series, *The Detective’s Album*, was published under the pseudonym “W.W.” from 1868 to 1908, and Fergus Hume, who is best remembered for *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886).

Kerry Greenwood, a lawyer, writes the long-running Phryne Fisher series, set in Victoria in the 1920s. Fisher is able to dabble in crime-solving because she is a wealthy independent modern woman. Despite her fabulous fashions and elite connections, she has a strong social conscience and many of the novels, from *Cocaine Blues* (1989) to *Murder and Mendelssohn* (2013), deal with issues such as racism, the treatment of young unwed mothers and conditions for factory workers. Greenwood also writes a contemporary series that combines elements of “cosy” and the chicklit genre. Greenwood’s protagonist, Corinna Chapman, is a baker and cat lover who starts sleuthing when she finds a young woman unconscious in the alley outside her bakery in *Earthly Delights* (2004).

Sulari Gentill is a former lawyer whose Rowland Sinclair series takes place in the 1930s against a turbulent backdrop of Australian political history and world events. Sinclair is an artist and, like Phryne Fisher, his inherited wealth means he doesn’t need to work and can devote himself to solving crimes. Whereas Fisher’s household staff sometimes assist with gathering information, Sinclair has a circle of eccentric friends including a Communist poet and a sculptress who participate in his adventures. Gentill’s characters interact with real figures of history, from Francis de Groot, a member of the right-wing New Guard, in *A Few Right Thinking Men* (2010), to...

The “hard-boiled” sub-genre was developed by the American crime writers Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Hammett had worked in private investigations before *The Maltese Falcon*, serialized in a crime magazine in 1929, launched Sam Spade as the archetypal detached, observant, charismatic sleuth who is wary of authority and handy with a gun. Chandler’s Philip Marlowe perfected the wisecracks when he arrived later in *The Big Sleep* (1939).

In the same year *The Maltese Falcon* was appearing weekly in America, British readers met Arthur Upfield’s Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte (“Bony”) in *The Barrakee Mystery* (1929). However, the first “Bony” novel published in Australia was *The Sands of Windee* (1931). Bony is part-Aboriginal, reflecting Upfield’s fascination with Indigenous culture and his knowledge of the outback from patrolling vast spaces in Queensland and Western Australia and working on sheep stations. The harsh, unforgiving nature of the outback and the way it can warp those who dwell there was strikingly portrayed in Kenneth Cook’s *Wake in Fright* (1961). Although not strictly crime fiction, it has influenced generations of Australian writers for its Gothic or noir atmosphere.

Peter Corris, known as the godfather of modern Australian crime fiction, created Cliff Hardy, the local incarnation of the sardonic private investigator. Since 1980, Hardy has appeared in over thirty novels up to *Silent Kill* (2013) and seven collections of stories. He roams the mean streets of Sydney, although the action-driven plots often take him to other parts of Australia and beyond. Over the years he has endured losing his investigator’s licence, the death of his girlfriend, heart bypass surgery, being swindled by his financial advisor, and various narrow escapes at the hands of criminals.

South African-born journalist Peter Temple has lived in Australia for over thirty years and revels in the local vernacular. His multi-stranded plots are set in Victoria and often explore corruption, including in politics, policing, religion and big business. Like several other crime writers, his work represents a crossover between “hard-boiled” and “police procedural”. The Jack Irish series, which features a former criminal lawyer turned private investigator, leans towards hard-boiled, while *The Broken Shore* (2005) and *Truth* (2009) are closer to police procedurals, highlighting the loyalties and rivalries between police officers. *Truth* was the first crime novel to win the Miles Franklin Award (in 2010) which some commentators saw as evidence that crime fiction had become respectable and accepted as part of mainstream Australian literature.

Garry Disher grew up on a farm in South Australia, which seems to have inspired his latest effort, *Bitter Wash Road* (2013), a tale of a city cop who is demoted and sent to the sticks, where he is assumed to be a whistleblower and accordingly ostracized. Disher’s main police procedural series,
featuring Detectives Hal Challis and Ellen Destry, is set on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. Apart from investigating the crimes of assorted serial killers, rapists and burglars, these novels tap into the personal lives of the police. Disher also writes a hard-boiled series with an unusual protagonist, Wyatt, a career criminal who plans major robberies, is double-crossed, and seeks revenge and recovery of the money.

Barry Maitland, a former professor of architecture, has applied his understanding of structure and design to plotting crime novels. For many years he wrote the Brock and Kolla police procedural series, set in Britain, but with his latest novel, Crucifixion Creek (2014), his focus has switched to Sydney. The first of a trilogy, it features Detective Harry Belltree and hurtles at a fast pace with a cast that includes bikie gangs and loan sharks, and unauthorized methods of investigation.

Two former detectives from New South Wales write police procedurals with a gritty, insider’s perspective. P. M. Newton digs deeply into the layers of Sydney with her Vietnamese–Australian female detective, Nhu “Ned” Kelly, who looks Vietnamese but doesn’t speak the language. The Old School (2010), set in Bankstown in the early 1990s, interweaves police corruption, Aboriginal rights and Ned’s family secrets. Beams Falling (2014) throws Ned, who is still recovering from the trauma she suffered in the first book, into investigating the heroin trade in Cabramatta. Karen M. Davis also portrays the personal impact of police work in Sinister Intent (2013) and Deadly Obsession (2014), as Detective Lexie Rogers bears the physical and psychological scars of her time in the force.

Forensic procedurals are similar to police procedurals in terms of brisk pacing and ethical dilemmas, but with more medical content. Katherine Howell, a former paramedic, depicts the work of ambulance staff as well as police. The crimes usually have a personal connection with one of the paramedics, whether it be the abduction of a paramedic’s son in Frantic (2007) or the paramedic as murder victim in Deserving Death (2014). Kathryn Fox is a doctor with a personal interest in forensics. Her novels feature Dr Anya Crichton, a Sydney-based pathologist and forensic physician who has been likened to Patricia Cornwell’s Dr Kay Scarpetta. The most recent book in the series, Fatal Impact (2014), explores a connection between the death of a child and genetically modified food.

Psychological suspense thrillers share some common elements with the hard-boiled and procedural sub-genres, but the emphasis is on escalating tension. Gabrielle Lord wrote the hostage drama Fortress (1980) and several other stand-alone novels before turning more fully to crime. She has written five titles featuring Gemma Lincoln, a private investigator who is an ex-cop, and three books involving a forensic examiner, Dr Jack McCain. Her latest novel, Dishonour (2014), is a police procedural with a new protagonist, Detective Inspector Debra Hawkins, who investigates domestic violence and forced marriage in Sydney’s Middle Eastern community.

Tara Moss, like her protagonist Makedde Vanderwall, was a model from Canada with an interest in psychology. In Fetish (1999), Vanderwall travelled to Sydney on a modelling assignment and discovered that a friend she planned to visit had been murdered. She survives many harrowing
situations during the series, culminating in Assassin (2012). Moss’ writing has since headed in other directions, including into the supernatural genre, but her fascination with the dark side suggests it is unlikely she has left the crime genre for good.

The fast-paced thrillers of Jaye Ford, a former journalist, are stand-alone stories including her latest, Already Dead (2014). In each of the novels a woman is thrown into jeopardy by a sudden, traumatic event and she must struggle with her fears, fight off danger, and find the answers to a mystery that may involve her own past. Honey Brown is another suspense writer who has been gaining prominence in recent years, winning a Davitt Award for Dark Horse (2013).

Although many Australian crime novels invoke dry humour, there is a particular type of larrikin yarn that gives equal weight to comedy and action. These stories usually involve a wise-cracking, accidental sleuth caught up in dangerous encounters with ruthless villains, while simultaneously juggling financial, family or romantic woes. The late Robert G. Barrett’s contribution to this sub-genre should not be forgotten. He wrote You Wouldn’t Be Dead For Quids (1984) and twenty or so other books starring Les Norton, a Kings Cross bouncer.

Meanwhile in Melbourne, Shane Maloney was a jack-of-all-trades before devoting himself to writing. In the Murray Whelan series, which began with Stiff (1994), Whelan rises from an electorate officer for a state minister to a Member of Parliament. Victorian politics and society are dissected with accuracy and affection, but the shady dealings depicted could happen anywhere in Australia.


“Chicklit” crime is a description that can be applied to larrikin sleuths who are female. Marele Day’s Claudia Valentine series (1988–95) paved the way to some extent for the current generation of feisty, resourceful and quick-witted heroines. In the Simone Kirsch series by Leigh Redhead, the protagonist is an ex-stripper turned private eye. The latest, Thrill City, appeared in 2010, and Redhead is reported to be working on the fifth book.

Marianne Delacourt’s creation, Tara Sharp, is
another female sleuth with a chaotic life, although Sharp has the unusual skill of being able to read people’s auras. The third book, *Stage Fright* (2012), was set in the music industry in Brisbane and, according to Delacourt’s website, she has finished the latest book.

A few local crime writers set their novels overseas, sometimes with Australian characters.

Michael Robotham, a former journalist and one of Australia’s most internationally renowned crime writers, has so far located all his thrillers overseas. In his main series, Joe O’Loughlin, a London psychologist with Parkinson’s disease, uncovers the motivations for people’s desperate behaviour. Robotham’s latest novel, *Life or Death* (2014), is a stand-alone thriller about the hunt for a prison escapee in the US.

Angela Savage worked for years in the health sector in southeast Asia before returning to Australia and writing a crime series set in Thailand, where Jayne Keeney, Aussie private eye, solves crimes involving a colourful cast of locals and expats. P. D. Martin writes a series featuring Sophie Anderson, an Australian ex-police officer who works for the FBI as a criminal profiler.

Also worth checking out are the books of overseas-born novelists who live in Australia but write about their homelands. Irish-born Adrian McKinty has written four police procedurals in which Detective Inspector Sean Duffy is a Catholic outsider in the Royal Ulster Constabulary of Northern Ireland in the 1980s.

Malla Nunn’s Emmanuel Cooper series has the protagonist grapple with cases in South Africa under apartheid in the 1950s. Academic Jane Goodall wrote a trilogy featuring Detective Briony Williams which spans the eras from the swinging 1960s to the punk 1970s in Britain.

Australians are eager to keep up with international cultural trends, including in literature. They enjoy escaping to exotic overseas destinations on their holidays and when they are reading. But, like a mystery in which the killer has been in plain view all along, Australian crime fiction has much to offer local readers. There are many strange journeys of discovery, from the lonely outback to the multicultural cities, many whodunits and whydunits to be solved in this vast and varied continent.