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Out of the big smoke: crime fiction in 2013

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Out of the big smoke: crime fiction in 2013

Abstract

Oddly enough and against trend – all those Scandinavian crime novels bobbing up in translation – I spent most of the year travelling Australia in crime fiction.

From East (Peter Cotton's Canberra in *Dead Cat Bounce*) to West (Alan Carter's Perth in *Getting Warmer*) with many intriguing side trips in between; a trip to Thailand with Angela Savage (*The Dying Beach*), and a retreat to rural South East New South Wales with Stuart Littlemore (*Harry Curry: Rats and Mice*).

Reviewing the route taken simply confirms my suspicion that Australian crime fiction has become emphatically "regional". The city is no longer the most compelling crime beat, if it ever really was.

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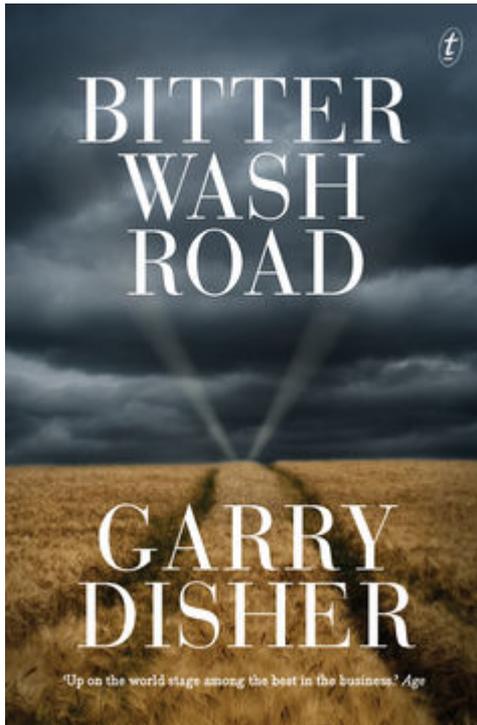
Australian crime fiction hit the regions on 2013 – and international crime held a few surprises too. jcoterhals

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Bitter Wash Road, Garry Disher



Bitter Wash Road by Garry Disher. Published by Text in 2013. Bitter Wash Road by Garry Disher. Published by Text in 2013.

The crime novel that exemplifies this decentralising move best is Garry Disher's [Bitter Wash Road](#).

In an outstanding career of literary and other kinds of fiction writing, this stand-alone police procedural is Disher's most accomplished crime novel to date. Like Peter Temple, Disher has established an elliptical, poetic style which evokes the landscape, the people and the rhythms of Australian life in ways which deserve recognition as great writing, irrespective of genre.

Set in rural South Australia, Bitter Wash Road deals with a number of pressing issues, including gender, race and police corruption.

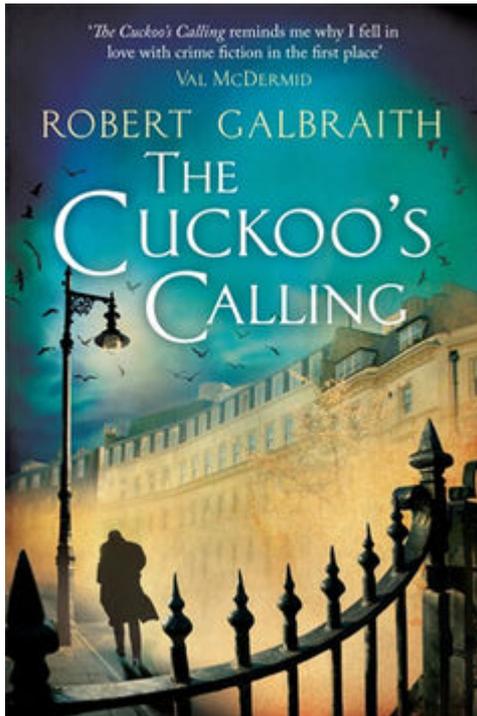
There's an implicit distrust of authority in both Temple and Disher's work. As exiled detective Hirsch drives into the hills to investigate gun fire, "following the custom of the locals" he lifts one finger from the steering wheel to greet the infrequent oncoming cars.

Turning off into the hills:

Stones smacked against the chassis. Skinny sheep fled, a dog snarled across a fence line and crows rose untidily from a flattened lizard.

Forget about plot, although it's a good one – the harsh beauty of Bitter Wash Road is all in the telling.

The Cuckoo's Calling, Robert Galbraith



The Cuckoo's Calling by Robert Galbraith. Published by Hachette. Hachette

As is the case in another notable crime novel of the year, [The Cuckoo's Calling](#) by Robert Galbraith, a.k.a. Harry Potter author J.K Rowling.

There was a lot of discussion at the time of Rowling's big reveal about whether or not this initial subterfuge had been a cunning publicity ploy on behalf of an already fabulously successful author. If that was the strategy, it could so easily have backfired.

I embarked on *The Cuckoo's Calling* prepared not to like it and with no compunction in saying so. Big targets are much easier to hit, and their sales unlikely to suffer as a result.

I was, however, entranced by the Golden Age of Crime meets 20th-century celebrity culture mash-up that is *The Cuckoo's Calling*. I loved the evolving screwball comedy relationship between the impossibly named private investigator Cormoran Strike (a name that suggests he could have graduated from Hogwarts) and his "temporary" secretary, the recently engaged Robin Ellacott whose inner sleuth owes much to the plucky heroines of my schoolgirl comics.

Once again, while I couldn't have given tuppence about the plot (it's a misconception that this is what matters most in crime fiction), I thoroughly enjoyed following the evolution, marked by acts of incremental affection and respect, of this central relationship.

Also satisfying were the waspish sideswipes at London's music scene and fashion elite. The crime novel has always been a great way to take the contemporary pulse.

Love Story, With Murders, Harry Bingham



Love Story, With Murders by Harry Bingham.

Published by Hachette. Hachette

Which brings me to the crime novel with the most intriguing female sleuth of the year, Harry Bingham's Welsh policewoman ("I see dead people") D.C. Fiona Griffiths in [Love Story, With Murders](#).

Fiona's first person account of her attempts to live on "planet normal" while dealing with a strange condition known as [Cotard's Syndrome](#) are ghoulish yet beguiling.

As a homicide detective blessed with the useful ability to communicate with the dead (or so she believes), Fiona is now well ahead in a game of dysfunctional heroines started by Lisbeth Salander in Steig Larsson's [The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo](#). Like the Larsson oeuvre, Love Story with Murders may not be the best crime novel in the year, but it has to be the one with the most eagerly anticipated sequel.

Expect the unexpected.