Cliffhanger


Sydney is changing. It's a city under the rubble of building construction and contentious issues — Darling Harbour, the monorail, the Bicentenary preparations. Debate rages over questions of US bases, conservation, pollution, the ID Card, AIDS, police corruption. But there's something that not many people are talking about. Terrorism. Is it a threat?

Peter Corris thinks it is. Here is Cliff Hardy's tenth and latest adventure, a cliff-hanging, fast-moving thriller set against the increasingly sophisticated Sydney of the here and now. Hardy is on assignment for politician Peter January and his assistant, Trudi Bell. Surveying the inner city, he says to Trudi:

This is one of the closest packed parts of Sydney. We've got every kind of ethnic group here, we've got people who've been let out of psychiatric hospitals. We've got trendies, we've got fascists ... I'll bet there's an illegal immigrant with a history of mental disturbance and a Family Court problem within a hundred feet of us right now.

She burst out laughing. "God, you make it sound dangerous."

Cliff Hardy is a creature of his city, hard-nosed, quick to act in a difficult situation, prepared to face danger. In a world swinging to the right, his work for a leftwing politician puts him in the hot seat, especially when it takes him on a brief trip to Washington: "I had the feeling that all the mirrors were two-way, and all the glass was bullet-proof." There he encounters highly-advanced security systems, bombings, threats, shootings — and killing.

But all these things are occurring in Hardy's Sydney, too. Peter Corris draws the link between Washington and Sydney, pointing up the reality of the global village. Peter January's "idea of oceanic zones of peace and freedom", a South Pacific region removed from the world of "bases, tests, arms deals and mercenary contracts" is made to seem untenable, fraught with risks. The January Zone is pervaded by the acrid smell of (mostly male) sweat, and even January himself is unscrupulously corrupt and cynical.

Peter Corris' Hardy series is becoming an institution. The January Zone contains all the familiar ingredients — a tightly constructed plot, the core of familiar characters, a situation clouded by intrigue and corruption, action that swerves repeatedly before accelerating to a climax and, of course, touches of romance. But this latest book plays before the wider backdrop of national and international conflict:

I turned the pages of a few copies of Time and the National Geographic, but it seemed like I'd read it all before — peace talks, famine, lost stone age tribe in Indonesia.

The thriller is a dominant genre of Western society, a form not concerned with theories about writing itself, but rather with the political and social reality that lies beyond the text. The sentences are short; the style is fast. The book gives information about the world to which it belongs in the most economical manner possible. The writing is transparent, you could say. We step right into Hardy's gritty Sydney, where we're given all the details, where there's no time to sleep, where kidnappings, blackmail, bomb explosions and stake-outs keep you on the move, gasping for breath.

The thriller, though, is an assessment of society that goes one step further, opening up possibilities for hair-raising drama. Terrorism is not our most immediate concern, but it happens often enough, and Corris is warning us that the situation is ripe for development. In a sober moment, Peter January tells Hardy:

It's organised there (in America), you know that. Here it's more individual. It's not built in.

And so, Washington is a bewildering series of impersonal attacks and disasters. On home ground in Sydney, Hardy stalks a single killer whose motives are at least personal rather than grounded in complex affairs of state. The killer, when he is eventually apprehended, is "a dangerous sociopath, a man obsessed with his own obscurity and a hatred of opinion-makers". That's a little reassuring, I suppose — but only for the time being.

The January Zone is a knotty, down-to-earth popular novel which keeps a firm grasp on psychological realism, even if what the characters actually do is restricted by the dictates of the genre. Corris' writing can be irritating at times. Is Hardy's sexism really necessary ("men were swearing and women were screaming")? The attention to detail is essential to the realism, but some
details are odd and unnecessary:
I put my arm around her. She'd taken off her shoes and, barefoot, she wasn't much above my shoulder. The afternoon sun shone strongly through the window and it was nice standing there with a warm woman who smelled good.

But these passages are exceptions, not the norm. Hardy is still a character you enjoy having around. And the ever-widening background against which he conducts his adventures is making the Hardy series increasingly interesting.

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Shark Fin Diplomacy


Muscovites are once again savoring Peking Duck and sipping shark fin soup after a twenty-year absence of Chinese cuisine from the tables of the Soviet capital. The newly-rebuilt Restaurant Pekin, with its Chinese cooks and weekly trans-Siberian train food deliveries is probably one of the most welcome spin-offs of rapidly improving relations between China and the Soviet Union. Even Moscow-based US diplomats must relish this aspect of Sino-Soviet rapprochement.

When relations between Moscow and Beijing deteriorated sharply at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966, Chinese students still in Moscow found it necessary to demonstrate their patriotism by embarking on militant demonstrations. This democratic luxury not even allowed the locals was, of course, intolerable to the Soviet authorities, and soon there were no Chinese students left in Moscow. Although Chinese cooks did not run amok with meat cleavers in search of revisionist scalps, they too were withdrawn around the same time. From then on mainly bullets and insults crossed the border between the two communist giants.

China and the Superpowers is an attempt by the Soviet “dissident marxist” historian, Roy Medvedev, to interpret the falling out between the USSR and China, and to place their past and current relations in an international context. Medvedev is well qualified to write on Sino-Soviet relations, having carried out postgraduate study on China in the early 1950s and closely followed relations between the two countries ever since. The book is extremely valuable because it provides a rare insight into intelligent Soviet perceptions of China. It was completed just after Gorbachev came to power, and already a Medvedev style of thinking appears to have become part of the official Soviet approach to China. For example, Medvedev’s opinion that the demarcation of the Sino-Soviet border along the Ussuri River section was “manifestly unfair” has now been acknowledged by the Soviet side.

A Georgian, like Stalin, Medvedev has written the most trenchant critique of Stalin’s rule from within the Soviet Union, Let History Judge, published in the West in 1971. Medvedev joined the Communist Party in 1956 after the 20th Congress’ denunciation of Stalin, and it was Khrushchev’s rise to power which allowed Medvedev to gather the material for his book. Brezhnev soon put a stop to denunciations of Stalin and in 1969 Medvedev was expelled from the party when he protested to the editor of the journal Kommunist about the appearance of an article defending Stalin. Since then, at least until recently, he has been a thorn in the side of the communist hierarchy in Moscow. Dismissed from his job in the early 1970s, he survived on royalties received from his various books and articles published abroad. At various times he has been threatened with imprisonment, the last occasion being immediately after Chernenko’s accession to power. Under Gorbachev, however, he appears to have become untouchable.

The bewilderment of many, Medvedev remains a marxist. Yet for him, marxist theory is not a closed and finished system of thought, but an historically evolving one. Furthermore, he maintains that there is no genuine socialism without democracy, a view he proclaimed most forcefully in his controversial work circulated in samizdat form in the Soviet Union and published in the West in 1972, On Socialist Democracy. Interestingly, according to a Russian-speaking professor from Beijing I talked to last year, this work has been translated into Chinese and circulated at the higher levels of the Chinese State and Party hierarchy. This fact would probably please Medvedev greatly, for at the heart of his latest book is the belief that China and the Soviet Union
share a great deal in common politically and economically.

What is often forgotten ... is the general desire to build the just socialist society, as a factor that brings the Soviet Union and China closer together. ... For all the deformations, distortions, personality cults, abuse of power and countless other lamentable deviations from the socialist ideal, both the Chinese and Soviet peoples are far from abandoning that ideal in order to adopt some other system of values as the basis for their social life and activity. This circumstance constitutes the firm foundation, however cluttered up with garbage it might be, on which the development of Sino-Soviet co-operation will take place.

Thus, whatever their antagonisms over recent decades, he argues, the two countries remain systemically compatible.

Medvedev’s is a balanced assessment of Sino-Soviet relations. He acknowledges Stalin’s lack of enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution. “The spectre of eastern Titoism seemed to Stalin a greater threat than the Titoism of a relatively small Balkan country.” So, while providing the new Chinese Republic with considerable economic aid in its early years, the Soviets also insisted that Beijing defer to Moscow on the world stage. This insistence was a key ingredient in the final split.

On the other hand, Mao’s own unreconstructed Stalinism led him to see himself as the natural heir to the leadership of the world communist movement after the death of Stalin. But, as Medvedev comments:

It was not only Mao Zedong, but the entire generation of Communist Party leaders of the 1930s and 1940s, who were raised in the firm conviction that the world communist movement must have a guide, and that it should be the most experienced and authoritative of the Communist parties, as well as the most authoritative, most ‘wise’ of all the leaders of the communist movement. As the inevitable consequence of a semireligious system of cults, the line of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin had to be continued ... and the new prophet must be acknowledged as such by all communist parties.

Khrushchev’s attack on “personality cults” was, therefore, a bitter blow for Mao. The Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, designed as a rapid and new path to communism, was part of Mao’s bid for leadership of the communist world. This combined with hostility to Khrushchev’s policy of peaceful coexistence (Mao believed in the inevitability of nuclear conflict between capitalism and communism), led to Khrushchev’s “hasty and politically ill thought out” decision, in Medvedev’s words, to withdraw Soviet advisers from China in 1960, and to the final split.

The economic impact of the withdrawal of these advisers, claims Medvedev, was greatly exaggerated — especially by Mao who was thereby able to blame the disasters of the Great Leap Forward on the Soviets, and pin a pro-Soviet label on his critics, such as Liu Shaoqi, “the Chinese Khrushchev”. Thus Moscow’s heavy-handed action helped strengthen Mao’s power in Beijing.

Neither side comes off lightly in Medvedev’s analysis of the causes of the split, but he clearly has much more sympathy for Khrushchev’s attempts at peaceful coexistence than Mao’s militant foreign policy rhetoric, and for Khrushchev’s anti-Stalinism compared with Mao’s praise for the dead dictator.

To the extent that Medvedev is an orthodox marxist, he no doubt believes that the capitalist/communist divide is fundamental to world politics in the long run, but he is also sophisticated enough to recognise that the impulses behind current world politics are more intricate. Thus, the key organising principle of his book is not the polarity between capitalism and socialism, but the triangular relationship between the major powers: China, the USA and the USSR. It is their mutual manoeuvring in pursuit of state interests which, in the case of the two superpowers, also means state interests projected as global interests, which is the central thrust of China and the Superpowers. These contend with one another primarily as powerful states and not as competing social systems. Each attempts to manoeuvre with and to manipulate the other. Interestingly, Medvedev clearly recognises this:

It is a natural desire of the superpowers to try to increase their influence among other countries, many of which as a consequence try to unite and co-operate in a defence against one or other superpower. Everything depends on the means that are employed in forming these alliances and exerting this influence. What is certain is that China will never again become the sort of military and political ally of the Soviet Union that she was in the 1950s. But it is equally certain that she will not become America’s political and military ally either, something which some influential American politicians have reckoned on. China will not become the junior partner in any military and political alliance ...

There are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends in this “eternal triangle” of major powers, he appears to be saying.

The important historical difference between capitalism and socialism which Medvedev does not mention is the growing international economic integration of world capitalism in contrast to the economic nationalism and autarchic reflexes of communist states to date, which hinder the development of any genuine internationalist impulses in these states. Will the current economic changes taking place in both China and the Soviet Union — their opening up to the world in one perspective, their integration into world capitalism in another — significantly alter the practice of international politics? One is tempted to say yes, but really it is too soon to tell.

China and the Superpowers is essential reading not only because it is an accomplished overview of international politics, but more importantly because it provides an insight into a climate of opinion and discussion in a section of the Soviet intelligentsia in Gorbachev’s USSR.

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Affirmation


Since 1975, when the first Sex Discrimination Act was passed in South Australia, the legislative landscape in Australia has changed considerably. There are now two Commonwealth and four State Acts relating to sex discrimination. Several collections of essays critically examine the scope, historical background, effectiveness and theoretical underpinnings of this legislation: Marilyn Sawyer's Program for Change, D.H. Broom (ed.) Unfinished Business and B. Baldock and B. Cass (eds.) Women, Social Welfare and the State are three of the best known.

Chris Ronalds' book differs from and complements these books. It is an examination of two Commonwealth laws: the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act (1986) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1984). Although the author deals with the background to the legislation and with some of the key criticisms which have been made of it, such discussion is kept to a minimum. Rather, the main emphasis is on outlining the content and actual and possible uses of the two Acts, and on discussing and answering the main practical questions which will arise in their implementation.

Chris Ronalds is a barrister who was closely involved with the drafting of both laws. Refreshingly, her detailed expertise has a treatment which is accessible to ordinary people, and a style free from jargon. True to its title, the book is a thoroughly practical, informative, concise, authoritative, well-written and easy-to-use handbook which will be of use to all the different parties covered by the legislation.

Even those who are reasonably familiar with both of the Acts will find a few surprises. Did you know that only five percent of the complaints investigated by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner at the Canberra office and about one percent lodged with the state agencies under the Sex Discrimination Act involved cases of indirect discrimination, although the Act has considerable powers in this area? That written complaints to the commission do not have to be made in English? That the Social Security Act and industrial awards, are exempt from sex discrimination legislation? Or that state government employees are not covered by the Act? (This is particularly important in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Tasmania, which do not have any corresponding State legislation.)

The two Acts which are the focus of this book are based on different approaches to inequality. The Sex Discrimination Act, which covers both men and women, is aimed at eliminating specific types of unequal treatment and at providing remedies to individuals who have suffered particular forms of discrimination. The legal process is based on conciliation, and the remedies prescribed are designed to be positive and educative rather than punitive. However, the Act is not primarily concerned with the provision of equal opportunities or equal results. The Affirmative Action Act, on the other hand, is concerned with women only, and addresses structural patterns which disadvantage women collectively. Rather than compensating after the event, it places the onus on employers to take active steps to prevent individual acts of discrimination.

The first part of the book deals with the Affirmative Action Act. It outlines the legislative requirements for the content of affirmative action programs and mentions a number of approaches that can be adopted to meet these requirements. It goes on to examine the obligations of employers under the Act, including the coverage and the phasing-in periods of the legislation and the reporting requirements. It concludes with a summary of various statutory functions of the Director of Affirmative Action, and an outline of similar legislation operating in various parts of Australia.

The second part of the book deals with the Sex Discrimination Act. It details the grounds of unlawful discrimination prescribed by the Act and the definition of direct and indirect discrimination. It then looks at sexual harassment, unlawful discrimination in employment, education, provision of goods, services and facilities, accommodation, club membership and advertisement, and with provisions aimed to stop victimisation of people lodging complaints or helping to implement the Act. The last three chapters deal with general exceptions to the Act, with the conciliation and inquiry procedures established under the Act, and with the actual processes and methods of conciliation. The book concludes with an outline of other anti-discrimination legislation operating in Australia and examines the constitutional issues which can arise when selecting which act to lodge a complaint under.

The appendices include a list of addresses of the various Australian agencies dealing with affirmative action and sex discrimination, a list of some forty legal cases referred to in the text, a comparative table of sex discrimination laws and a brief bibliography which lists key public documents on affirmative action and sex discrimination, as well as further reading.

The book is well worth reading. Its main use will be as a practical guide to all those affected, in some way, by the legislation. To those who want to examine further the historical and theoretical issues involved, the handbook will provide a reliable factual starting point.

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