

## **BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 4**

**Publisher: Text Publishing**

**Book Title: Chain of Evidence**

**Author: Garry Disher**

**Reviewer: Chris Hanley**

When I finished the last Garry Disher, Hal Challis novel "Snapshot", I made a mental note not to rush out and visit the Mornington Peninsula. His new detective Challis novel, the fourth in the series, "Chain of Evidence", makes a visit to this part of the world even less likely.

Garry Disher is a prolific writer who writes across many different genres. The common threads that run through all his books are the quality of the writing, with particular emphasis on his strong characterisation, his powerful sense of place and the often impassioned social and economic observations.

Garry is also a much underrated writer and some of his books, like "Past the Headland" have been among the best works of fiction published in this country in recent years.

"Chain of Evidence" is set on the Mornington Peninsula where Garry lives. The novel begins with a chilling well-planned and now all too common abduction of a small girl by a paedophile. The solving of this horrendous crime is one of the plots which runs parallel with another case being investigated 1000 kilometres away in northern South Australia, where Hal Challis has gone to expunge some family demons and sit with his dad while he dies.

Sergeant Ellen Destry is left in charge on the Mornington investigation and she and Challis have this "thing" going that is not actual yet, but they would like it to be if you know what I mean.

Disher is very good at keeping lots of pots (people) simmering while other action takes place and he uses Destry and Challis's feelings for each other to push the plots along.

You have to read every word in his Challis crime novels as you had to in his Wyatt series, a set of six novels with a protagonist who is a hardened and at time vicious professional criminal. His brisk detailed and realistic plots always work in conjunction with

characters you can imagine sitting down with and having a cup of tea and a real conversation.

In "Chain of Evidence", there is a particularly good characterisation of a young policeman called Tank. This young ill-equipped for life copper encapsulates all that is wrong with our education and law enforcement systems and Disher manages in spite of the character flaws of this young guy to let us understand how hard it must be for poorly educated kids from poor families to uphold our laws.

If you do not like novels with in-your-face social and political comment then "Chain of Evidence" might give you some grief, and apologies to anyone from Frankston for this next quote. "Frankston is Australia with its modest, usually disappointed expectations and achievements, its anxieties and conservatism. We admire rapist footballers, own plasma TV's we can't afford, grow obese and vote to keep out strangers. Our fifteen year olds get poor educations, move on to senseless crimes, addiction, jail time or death behind the wheel of a stolen car and if they make it past fifteen they can't find work. A great banal sameness defines us making most of us soporific...."

And just to be fair, Garry dishes up a few words of wisdom about the Wellness industry in the later sections of the book. When Sergeant Destry gives her views on alternative therapies "It seemed to Ellen that naturopaths were the acceptable face of what bugged her. It seemed to her that on every back road and side street or strip of shops on the Peninsula a "healer" of some kind could be found. They set up wellness boutiques and read palms, read tarot cards and tea leaves.....offered massage, crystal therapy or ear candling."

I often feel when I read crime fiction that the characters are literally cut out of cardboard and pasted on the page in the writer's haste to just use plot to motor the book along. Disher writes detailed and fast moving plot but he anchors it with characters with normal human warts and foibles. Sergeant Destry is a kleptomaniac with daughter relationship problems and Challis is a distant loner who can't talk to his father and pisses his pants in a particularly chilling scene where he is fighting for his life. Scobie, another one of the detectives, is locked in a grey soulless marriage and is addicted to home made muffins and Tank is a boofhead who is dumber than the criminals he is supposed to be catching. The characters all seem Very Normal.

I strongly recommend you read this novel and when you do go to page 96 and read the section describing the town of Mawsons Bluff,

the town where Challis solves the murder of his brother in law while he waits for his dad to die. The description is eerily like many country towns around Australia and some towns very close to our region. "He was curious to see no-one was about. There were clues to humans – cars parked in driveways....but everyone was inside spending a dutiful Sunday with relatives and curtains were drawn over every window..." Does it sound like anywhere you have ever visited?