

Alastair Sarre, *Prohibited Zone* (Wakefield Press, 2011)

Alastair Sarre's *Prohibited Zone* is tagged 'a thriller in the desert' and it certainly lives up to its generic expectations. Its narrator and, yes, hero, is ex-footballer and now Roxby Downs mining engineer Steve West. Westie to those who know him, whether or not they like him, is a bloke's bloke who just happens to be passing through Woomera on his way to Adelaide and the arms of his married lover when activists engineer a mass escape from the Immigration Detention Centre.

In a nearby small town, full of familiar faces, West is caught up with one of the break-out's instigators, the activist Kara Peake-Jones. Kara asks him to help her conceal the, yes, beautiful Saira Abdiani, an Afghan refugee who the authorities, and some other more shady characters, are particularly keen to track down. Saira, it turns out, is a friend to Amir Ali Khan, also on the run, and, if the intelligence services and media are to be believed, an associate of Osama bin Laden and for that, potentially a Very Dangerous Terrorist.

Kara is a tough and practical customer, a perfect foil to the unsentimental, and perhaps emotionally dim, Steve West. She divines that she can extract from him the help she needs to get her charge to a safe house in Adelaide and tell her story to the media and expose the awful conditions at Woomera. While West is equally unsentimental and apparently not attracted to Kara, he does her bidding, less from a sense of altruism, than a sense of masculine duty to protect the women from the predatory, mercenary grasp of the detention centre guards, particularly the singularly savage Peter Janeway.

This is intentional genre fiction. The novel responds directly to Australian politics of the mid-2000s, to the be-alert-not-alarmed nonsense fear campaign that all sides of Australian politics engaged in (and still engages in), and which underpinned popular support for the awful detention centre policies of the Howard government. It's a novel about what happens when power is wielded over the powerless.

There's a risk that the true awfulness of the detention centres will be cheapened by what is for the most part a fairly black-and-white story of well-intentioned people being unfairly victimised by a paranoid and self-interested gang of thugs and authorities. The problem with thrillers is that they often rely on a premise that begins as plausible, but ends up somewhere near the ridiculous. They expose something of the falsity of all plot-driven fiction: life doesn't have a plot. Stuff doesn't tie up that neatly.

There's also a danger that Sarre will alienate some readers for whom there will be face-in-palm moments that might reveal more about their own soft-L liberal biases than anything else. This is particularly apparent in the very masculine narration. There's more than just a little of the male gaze at work in the structure and focus of the narrative. Take West's dissection of Peake-Jones here, for example:

she wasn't blonde, she wasn't naked and she wasn't a calendar on the wall. She wasn't even particularly pretty. She was dressed inelegantly in a khaki-coloured shirt buttoned up far enough to hide any hint of cleavage, a pair of long shorts and sturdy walking boots. Between the bottom of the shorts and the top of the boots were the middle parts of a

Book reviews: *Prohibited Zone* by Alistair Sarre. David Sornig.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

pair of slim, brown legs. Her shirt had damp patches under the arms and her face gleamed with sweat. Her large mouth turned up at the ends as if her face wasn't quite large enough to accommodate it straight. She had chestnut hair that was mostly tied back, but loose strands had fallen forward over her ears. (18-19)

What we've got here is a story narrated by a man, who sees women, principally, in terms of appearance, particularly sexual appearance. It's possible to read this as an intentional over-performance of masculinity. It certainly ties in with the over-performance of Australian class distinction through accent, which works to the detriment of the quality of characterisation.

Trent grunted. 'You'd be fucken lucky,' he said. 'They'll all be in Adlae by tomorra or Sinnie the day afta.'

Chook had come to the bar. 'Who gives a rat's, anyway?' he said. 'What they gunna do, escape back to Afghanistan? Let 'em.'

'Nah, yer can't trust them fucken towel 'eads,' said Trent.

'Yer never know when one of 'em's gunna blow up in ya face.'

I refrained from telling Trent that in his case nobody would notice the difference. (13)

The resultant comedy here is typical of Westie's laconic, not-quite-one-of-the-boys attitude. He comes across as superior. It's the people who have the broadest accents who are, frankly, blessed with the least capacity for critical thought. They are boofheads.

Sarre's cleverness is to deliver in Steve West an all-Australian bloke cut from the Triple-M listening, footy-playing, root-chasing demographic that, one presumes, perhaps unfairly, to be most vulnerable to the kind of cheap fear-based politics that was practised so well by John Howard and which still sets the agenda for both Labor and the Coalition.

Sarre, I suspect, is trying to get in to the hearts and minds of the thriller readership by providing an ethical hero, an alternative vision of blokey heroism. He is not preaching to the converted here. Yes, there's a bit of soapboxing, and yes, the story ticks almost every box in the sorry story of immigration detention in Australia in the mid-2000s in the paranoid wake of Tampa, SIEV-X, 9/11 and Bali, but it's also the thriller we needed to have.

David Sornig