Downmarket Derring-do

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Peter Temple
WHITE DOG
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We were on the Tullamarine tollway, now at its early-evening best, a howling blur of taxis, trucks, cars, trade vehicles, drivers all tired and vicious. So begins Peter Temple’s new novel, with Jack Irish, lawyer and investigator, on his way to Melbourne Airport to farewell his elusive dream woman, Linda Hillier, who is headed for a glittering media career in London. Left alone in the town he knows only too well, Irish is once again free to involve himself in the sort of downmarket derring-do that is his reason for living.

White Dog, an extract from which appeared in Best Australian Stories 2002, is the fourth novel in the Jack Irish series. This time around our hero is called upon to find out whether the capricious, unstable artist daughter of a rich elderly knight is as guilty of the murder of her shady lover as she appears. The result is a gently paced, dialogue-based thriller that mixes social commentary and a little satire with a judicious peppering of violence.

White Dog is nothing if not topical: the drama takes place against the backdrop of the current royal commission into the building industry in Victoria. While it is contemporary in setting and argot, there are at least two literary traditions within crime fiction at work in this novel.

One is the specifically Melbourne line of crime writing descended from Fergus Hume’s The Mystery of a Hansom Cab (1886), the original and still the best-known novel about the city. (Interestingly, Temple, like Hume, is not himself a born and bred Melburnian, having arrived in Australia from his native South Africa approximately two decades ago. I was also struck by the fact that the endings of both Hansom Cab and White Dog involve the central character leaving the city for the seemingly brighter prospects of the Old Country.) Like Hume, Temple uses his plot as a vehicle to explore the city in all its considerable breadth and fathomable depth. He demonstrates how its far-flung inhabitants share the one urban reality and perhaps common destiny in this once-splendid city, which, to this day, is struggling to recover from the depression of the 1890s.

The quaintly named protagonist Jack Irish is ideally equipped to move freely in any company, whether he members of the Melbourne Club or their equally established confrères over at Trades Hall. In many ways, he is a typical Melbourne professional man of his generation. He went to Melbourne Grammar and studied law at Melbourne University, but loves nothing better than AFL football and going to the races. He reads The Age, but professes disdain for the culture section. He has no time for the pretentious late-loving ‘affiliation clusters’ that clog up his beloved Brunswick (or ‘Brunchwick’) Street, but is not averse to a (genuine) cup of coffee himself. He likes old cars, as long as they have an engine comprising at least eight cylinders, and has an abiding interest in real estate. At the same time, he is learning the art of cabinetmaking, listens to Vivaldi and even reads novels, albeit as a cure for insomnia. In all, he is a middle-class, middle-aged, temperamentally conservative Melburnian, possessing just a little more brute sex appeal than most men of his type. I suspect he is representative of many of this novel’s readers, except of course for the more obvious elements of fantasy.

Also present in the novel’s literary gene pool is the chivalric strain in crime fiction most often associated with Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, itself a creation that harks back to the tales of medieval romance. In his famous essay ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, Chandler describes his hero as a ‘man of honour’ who is ‘in search of the truth’. Marlowe typically gets into serious trouble only when he insists on discovering the sinister facts and conspiracies outside his brief. Needless to say, he never can resist a damsel in distress, even if she also turns out to be a femme fatale. So it is with Irish, who carries his pure but world-weary heart with him wherever he goes, from the stately hill stations of Macedon to the seedy strip clubs at the end of King Street.

The moral universe of Temple’s novel is similar to that of Chandler. Indeed, there is in White Dog a faint echo of The Big Sleep. Marlowe’s connection with the widower General Sternwood and his two spoiled daughters has a parallel in Irish’s relationship with the elderly patriarch Sir Colin Longmore, his beautiful but psychologically damaged daughter Sarah and her mysterious older sister Sophie.

Of course, all this real or supposed literary inheritance does not guarantee an entertaining read. Temple’s clipped, observant, journalistic prose style ensures that the pages of the novel turned almost unaided. The feral nightmare reminded me of Deliverance, but it is effective, even darkly humorous. As far as the more sociological aspects go, Temple captures the atmosphere, mood and tempo of Melbourne — a town that is conservative, philistine, provincial, gruffly sentimental, nostalgic, sport-obsessed, materialistic and cheerfully callous. The misadventures of Jack Irish are true to that spirit.