

Leah Giarratano is well on the way to establishing a reputation as one of Australia’s top crime writers, and Watch the World Burn, her fourth novel featuring Detective Sergeant Jill Jackson, will do nothing to tarnish her image.

Jackson is not involved in the investigation of the death by burning of an elderly woman in a high-class Sydney restaurant managed by former cop Troy Berigan, but her lover, Sergeant Scott Hutchinson, is on the case. When he’s killed by a petrol bomb, and other apparently unconnected murders, many involving arson, follow, she becomes drawn into the case, working with former partner Gabriel Delahunt, from the Feds.

Though Jackson carries psychological scars from childhood trauma, and is shattered by Hutchinson’s death, she, teamed with the coolheaded Delahunt, and using methodical forensics and psychological profiling, is eventually capable of solving this disturbing and puzzling series of crimes.

The plot ticks along like a well-maintained machine, knitting together several strands of narrative which seem at first quite disparate. There’s Troy Berigan, who has left the police after reporting some colleagues for bashing some young kids in the cells. It doesn’t help when he’s the nearest person to the murder victim in his restaurant: some of his resentful former workmates are on the case, and he has a juvenile conviction for arson. Predictably he’s in the frame for murdering her, though Delahunt knows it wasn’t him. Meanwhile, he’s struggling to look after his teenage brother and sister, and doing his best to make what amends he can to the murdered woman’s family, who are appearing odder every time he meets them.

And there’s the local member of parliament, Erin Hunt, campaigning for increased security cameras at suburban railway stations, grieving over her recent divorce, struggling with a stringent diet and exercise regimen – and terrified when her home is petrol-bombed when her children are there alone.

Giarratano writes pacily and colloquially without overdoing the colourful language. Her people are believable and though there are plenty of explosions and lots of fairly gruesome violence, there’s a refreshing lack of the usual formulas – conflict with unimaginative superiors, highly-trained professionals rushing headlong into dangerous situations, and most of all the Teflon-coating with which we are supposed to credit many heroes of crime novels. Jill Jackson and Troy Berigan are both wounded by events in their pasts, and their courage is directed towards dealing intelligently with the legacy of these events, and salvaging what they can for the future. Watch the World Burn is exciting, intriguing and satisfying, by far the best detective novel I’ve read this year.