This is the author’s radio script of this article.


Alastair Sarre’s thriller *Prohibited Zone* was shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Award for Best Unpublished Manuscript. The fact that it didn’t win indicates an amazing wealth of talent among SA writers.

Though it doesn’t break a lot of new ground, and follows the thriller format pretty faithfully, *Prohibited Zone* is a wonderfully intelligent and assured piece of writing. The hero, Steve West, is a mining engineer on leave from Olympic Dam. Like all his antecedents in the genre, Steve is one of those ‘hard men with soft democratic centres’, in Jenny Diski’s memorable phrase (from a recent London Review of Books article about Bogart). He drives headlong into trouble on his way through Woomera to Adelaide. There’s been a riot at the detention centre, and some asylum seekers have escaped. There’s a general impression that despite his wisecracks his heart’s in the right place, but his attitude is sceptical, if not cynical, and it is with some difficulty that one of the activists who has been involved in the escape manages to rope him in to help one of the escapees. This naturally leads to life-threatening encounters with shady ASIO and CIA agents and other unpleasant characters, including a terrific scene in one of the more remote car parks at Flinders University.

The first thing I noticed about *Prohibited Zone* was the wordplay – ‘Dusk was falling soft on a land as hard as old bones’ isn’t a bad opening sentence – and the next was the hardboiled attitude – ‘I had the road and the world and the whole damned universe to myself.’ These are par for the course in the genre, but the unusual wit and perceptiveness of the narrative soon made itself felt, along with its compulsive readability. There are a few characters with no obvious redeeming features – perhaps that’s another compulsory feature of the genre - but otherwise there are plenty of shades of grey. Steve is no untouchable hero: though he’s clever, strong and resourceful, there’s plenty of room for improvement in his relationships with women. He’s also something of an unreliable narrator, at least in the sense that he seems wilfully ignorant about various topical issues, which is actually a clever device to allow them to be introduced quite naturally into the narrative; when he asks, for example, about the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims. The female characters, who often have to do the patient explaining, are intelligent and believable individuals, neither demonised nor idealised.

When you live in Adelaide it’s a rare pleasure to read a novel set so confidently in one’s own city, and the odd sly dig aimed at the locals (like Port Adelaide fans) is amusing. But Sarre’s ambitions are clearly aimed towards an audience beyond South Australia, given the explanations of everything
from Snowtown to the Goyder Line studding the narrative, and by golly he deserves to find it with this accomplished, clever novel.