Stephen M. Irwin’s *The Broken Ones* is a post-apocalyptic, dystopian thriller with added horror. Some time, early in the millennium, the Earth’s poles have switched, causing thousands of aircraft to fall from the sky, and coinciding with a change in weather patterns worldwide. Brisbane is now a cold, grey city, cursed with perpetual winter – at least for the duration of this novel. But the chief problem is that each survivor has been endowed with his or her own ghost, which has a ruinous effect on morale and productivity.

This situation is helpfully set out in a Prologue, purporting to be an Editorial for the *Argus* three years after Grey Wednesday, as the fateful day has become known.

Oscar Mariani, our hero, is a cop in charge of a dwindling unit contemptuously known by colleagues as the Barelies – as in ‘barely legal’. Their role is to investigate crimes which the suspects have attributed to the influence or urging of their ghosts. The mangled body of a murdered girl he finds at the sewerage works has a strange symbol carved into her flesh, and he suspects some kind of occult connection.

Along with the supernatural elements, from Assyrian, Akkadian and Aztec civilizations, this novel manages to tick just about every box for the genre. There’s the loner detective, alienated from his colleagues and in a precarious position at work, with uncaring or corrupt superiors. There’s a serial killer preying on disabled children. Oscar’s wife has left him for a tidier man, but despite being scruffy he’s still a chick magnet. The only question is which of the delightful women he meets – the high class hooker with the heart of gold, the billionaire property developer, the nurse from the children’s home – will manage to get him into bed. He’s a thoroughly decent, honest guy, so of course it will only be one of them. He continually gets severely wounded but manages to keep going without seeking medical help. Meanwhile his father is critically ill and there are ongoing issues to be sorted out there before it’s too late, and before he goes off singlehanded to confront the killer he’s identified with the help of his gut instinct.

Sometimes I found it hard to remember that this story is meant to be set in Australia. Do Australian cops call unidentified female corpses ‘Jane Does’? Do we say ‘I did the math’? In my world we call ‘chain link’ fences ‘cyclone fences’. All this and much more makes me think Irwin has his eye on the American market, unless he’s just watched too many American thrillers.

Still, Irwin writes with verve. He overdoes it sometimes: ‘Uniformed police in blue knit jumpers or blue leather jackets seemed lashed to ice-white torch beams that scoured the path like erratic dogs’ is a bit over the top. But I liked the description of Oscar’s antagonist in civvies: ‘Haig made plain clothes look lean and efficient, as if they weren’t clothes at all, but a pelt.’ *The Broken Ones* is spooky, and chilling, and frightening, and compelling, and everything a thriller should be, so it’s the sort of thing you’ll like, if you like that sort of thing.