Alastair Sarre, *Ecstasy Lake* (Wakefield Press, 2016)

Ecstasy Lake is well-named. For we know that most things with the word 'lake' in them are associated with nefarious criminal activity: dragging the lake; Chandler's *Lady in the Lake*; Veronica Lake; and Robert (B)lake. Sarre's fast-paced, unpredictable and highly readable crime novel is the second to feature South Australian protagonist Steve West (the first being the political thriller, *Prohibited Zone*[1]). The novel opens with West flying into Adelaide. He soon begins working for his millionaire mate, Tasso, applying for a mining lease on outback land that may contain billions of dollars in gold. *Ecstasy Lake* is also well-named due to place being such an integral part of this novel. And rightly so.

Place is often considered the fifth Beatle of crime fiction. Why? Firstly, natural and human-made environments lend themselves to the plots of crime fiction (imagine the game of hide and seek without any trees or buildings). Secondly, the feelings evoked by particular locations (of claustrophobia, isolation, impending invasion etc.) can augment the feelings of dread and anxiety we lovers of crime fiction seem to find so damn pleasant. Crime fiction fulfils various psychological needs. Some of the best examples paradoxically exaggerate readers' own anxieties and then relieve them by (generally) presenting a solution to a mystery. This shows us that *all* problems are surmountable – even if trudging through Hell is required to reach a solution. The way that Sarre uses Adelaide and environs to expand our anxieties is to tap into the oft-quoted axiom that Adelaide is a big country town where we cannot keep anything secret; after all, we residents are only *two degrees* of separation away from someone who knows what we are doing. Another local fear this novel draws out is that Adelaide's underworld – and possibly overworld – is controlled by ruthless bikie gangs.

One of the many things *Ecstasy Lake* does with brilliance is to consciously and frequently discuss place. The opening sentences set the tone:

> We flew in over the low woods of the Mount Lofty Ranges, hazy, lazy and ready to burn. The city lounged between the hills and the blue tongue of the Gulf, the Torrens Island power station stacks standing like forgotten survey pegs at the edge of the saltpans. (1)

The reason why continual references to place do not become overcooked is because West is a mining engineer, who inhabits the world of engineers, miners and geologists. This clever choice of profession allows West's geological and geographical descriptions to make perfect sense, even when he describes people. In West's paradigm, for instance, the forehead of the aptly named mining security expert, Goldsworthy, 'looked as hard as a rock face, and straw-coloured hair ran up on either side of it towards the summit, like summer grass on Willunga Hill' (58). References to actual local places such as Willunga Hill, Globe Derby Park, Edinburgh Hotel, Hindley Street and Glenelg make the story relatable and idiosyncratic. Other places are not named but are easy and fun to work out – such as the End of the World hotel in Hindley Street or the 30-storey building West occasionally works at in Currie Street. (A pleasing detail is that this building includes West's name in the title. You with me? If not, Google immediately!) Part of an exciting action sequence is set in Morphettville Racecourse. This setting has a fine pedigree, for Arthur Gask's excellent crime novel *The Secret of the Garden*[2] (originally published in 1924) also used this racecourse as a crime setting. Nevertheless, many of Gask's novels and other early Australian crime fiction used a highly

---

[1] Alastair Sarre, *Prohibited Zone* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2011).
[2] Arthur Gask, *The Secret of the Garden* (London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1924).

unusual 'zero setting',[3] due largely to a lack of postcolonial confidence in Australia's cultural and commercial entitlement to host crime fiction. Unfortunately, with a modern history of assorted serial murders that have attracted national and international (negative) attention, Adelaide now has the seedy credibility to refer to its particular quirks, perks and underworld jerks. An ongoing discussion throughout this book is that Adelaide can be a great city. Surely, a part of this is to name it in culture and people's imaginations in the way that *Ecstasy Lake* does.

Angry Penguin Max Harris was an enlightened whitefella who believed in writing about the Australian landscape in a particularly Indigenous-Australian way, which recognises the spirituality of place. As Indigenous-Australian identity is so connected to place, some form of Indigenous acknowledgement is a necessity in *Ecstasy Lake*. This comes in the form of Joe Bettong, whose mob is not identified and whose country includes the outback ghost town of Parakilla. Bettong's country also contains the goldmine. The way West and Tasso treat Bettong with genuine respect is a political comment on how Indigenous Australians should be treated in general, but particularly in relation to mining rights. As with his first novel, Sarre's *Ecstasy Lake* demonstrates that, providing action and pace are not neglected, the crime novel *is* about solving problems and, therefore, suggesting solutions to political and social problems is certainly within the genre's wheelhouse.

As part of the effective portrayal of place in *Ecstasy Lake*, attitudes and speech patterns of Adelaide ring true. For example, Adelaideans can relate to Tasso's comment that Adelaide 'is a town where the most important question you can ever be asked is which high school you went to' (25). And whether West is at a pub ordering a 'schooner of Pale' (202), or telling someone, 'Don't be a dick' (141), the language is very familiar. As talented a crime writer as Peter Temple is, his characters' clipped dialogue is often so laconic that it is unrecognisable. Sarre's dialogue, however, is often laconic (in the case of West) but still appears natural. In fact, Westie is one of the great smartarse voices in crime fiction. One potential danger of the casual smartarse hero is that he/she may convey too much humour and not enough angst to be really dark and twisted. A cunning device Sarre uses to address this is for West's brother Luke to suggest that West's flippant one-liners are actually a neurotic way of avoiding painful introspection: 'You always deflect when there's a danger of getting personal, don't you? Make a joke of it' (243). Nevertheless, one sometimes feels that West needs a few failed marriages behind him and an ongoing opium addiction. It would be interesting to see more obvious neuroses in our lovable smartarse in future novels – of which I hope there are tens. For along with the mood suggested by place, the neuroses of a crime novel's protagonist can also serve to increase readers' anxiety levels in the way that we love and Maslow's hierarchy of needs would be stumped to explain. That aside, *Ecstasy Lake* is a stupendously good example of how a crime novel can entertain deeply while provoking thought and the best sense of patriotism.

Michael X. Savvas
Flinders University

---

[3] Stephen Knight, *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1997) 152.