
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Smokescreens and Searchlights* is the portentous title of a novel by Bill Guy, for many years the foreign editor of the Adelaide Advertiser. This is a well-meaning book, even a knowledgeable book, but it is not a good novel. It is difficult, in fact, to find one redeeming feature.

Firstly, and most obviously, Guy suffocates his reader with too much information. The hero meets his wife for the first time – Guy tells us what they ate for dinner. This is distant background material; the wife has now died, but no detail is spared. As Robert Dessaix said at Writers’ Week, a writer needs to let his readers breathe – and give their imagination some scope. It’s probably no coincidence that often, while reading this book, I had a physical sensation of nausea. I was being smothered with extraneous facts.

This plethora of information doesn’t add up to more accurate characterisation. The hero David Hallam is of course a goodie. He is the newly appointed editor of a newspaper in a fictional Australian state capital. He is a great boss, a brilliant editor, a brave investigative journalist, a sensitive lover – conveniently a widower after his wife’s tragic accident. His love interest is the features editor, Liz, a highly suitable choice, being an almost exact replica of his lamented wife Lisa. There are many other journalists in the book, and every one of them is a goody, except the production editor – ‘more a technician these days than a journalist.’ He is the Judas of the outfit. Everyone else is won over immediately by Hallam’s youthful charm and consummate skill. Guy tries to
differentiate these worthies for us, but there are too many names and not enough individual features.

So the *real* journalists are all goodies. Others on their side are some scientists and engineers who have become whistle-blowers, and The Aborigines, a cheerful but amorphous mob. Ranged against this valiant crew is a clutch of villains: a wicked mining company poisoning the outback water and corrupt, venal politicians – conservatives, of course.

After a couple of hundred pages of this, I began seriously to wonder about the point of a book like this. OK, we might learn some facts. But there is no insight beyond the facts. Every feeling described is drawn from a very small stock, and platitudes abound. Humour – well, it is at the level of affectionate winks exchanged behind his wife’s back when one of the journos has his boss to dinner. These attempts to leaven the doughy prose only make its drabness more obvious. The situations, characters, dialogue and writing are all utterly predictable – nothing surprises, nothing delights. *Smokescreens and Searchlights* is a very dull book indeed.