
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Yesterday’s Dust* is Joy Dettman’s fourth novel, and is a sequel to her first, *Mallawindy*. It continues the family saga of the Burtons, a melodrama of violence, sex and secrets set in country New South Wales. The writing is not especially fine, but there are touches of wry humour among the hard-boiled cliches, and the narrative is well-paced and gripping.

The anti-hero, Jack Burton, had several children but spoiled his favourite, Liza, who consequently grew greedy and wilful. Thirty years before the action of the novel, Jack had discovered his identical twin brother Sam sexually abusing the child, and in his rage killed him and, accidentally, the little girl as well. Jack managed for more than 20 years to cover up his crime. With the collusion of his sister-in-law, he masqueraded as his brother, living on their property some distance from Mallawindy, at the same time maintaining a presence in Mallawindy with his own wife Ellie and their four remaining children. The necessary absences were explained rather lamely by long overseas trips and unspecified illnesses, and the deception was aided by an estrangement between the two branches of the family. Six and a half years before the novel begins, however, Jack disappeared from Mallawindy. The novel relates the events of the six months until Jack can be officially pronounced dead, and Ellie can collect the life insurance.
There are many flashbacks, and the story is so intricate that it is some
time before the reader can sort out the sequence of events leading up to the
novel’s present. Having read the earlier novel, *Mallawindy*, may help with this,
but the information is all in *Yesterday’s Dust* if the reader is patient enough to
persevere. Luckily, this is the sort of novel in which the plot is the driving
force, and the reader’s curiosity is engaged to the full. There are many
unpredictable twists and shocks, but the ending is surprisingly benign, providing
redemption for several characters while also allowing them to maintain their
convenient fictions and, in effect, get away with murder, or at least
manslaughter, and perjury. It is not a whodunnit. The characters who know or
discover the truth are also those whose interests are served by keeping it a
secret, and part of the suspense is created by the narrowly averted dangers of
discovery by those who would not be so discreet.

Dettman is technically adroit. The narrative, although third-person
throughout, is related from the point of view of several characters, and the
language of the narrative as well as the dialogue is adapted to suit each
personality. Jack’s wife Ellie, for example, is a simple woman with a limited
understanding of her situation, still hoping that Jack will turn up alive after all,
and her sections of the narrative are simply told and full of old-fashioned
cliches. Her daughter Ann, an intelligent woman now with children of her own,
in her childhood witnessed the deaths of her sister and uncle, Her flashback to
the dreadful events of thirty years before is told compellingly in the present
tense through the child’s remembered consciousness. The novelist Malcolm
Fletcher, former teacher at the Mallawindy school, adds a metafictional aspect
to the novel. His trashy novels, written under a pseudonym, have been based on
Jack’s life, and until he discovers the truth about Jack’s disappearance he finds himself unable to write the impatiently awaited tenth in the series. His sections of the narrative are couched in his own brand of slightly pedantic prose.

This novel is engrossing, with some strong characters and vivid incidents, but fastidious readers might find it a little too sensational. The number of accidental or violent deaths, especially among the children, is truly staggering. Three of Ellie and Jack’s 7 children do not survive childhood, Ann’s first child dies after a fall, Malcolm Fletcher’s son dies young and precipitates the suicide of his mother. There are plenty of fine set-pieces – the wedding that becomes a celebration of the supposed death of the bride’s father, the memorial service which becomes a celebration of the engagement of his son, the last-minute accidental wounding of a would-be murderer, his life saved by the intended victim and his alienated son – irony upon dramatic irony.

*Yesterday’s Dust* is best read straight through. Wrench yourself away from it for a day or two and you may find not only that you lose the thread of the plot, but also that the melodrama in which you have been happily immersed starts to seem slightly ludicrous. Nevertheless, it is a well crafted and entertaining novel and will no doubt do well.