

Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival 2021 - "The Way it is Now" Transcript

SPEAKERS

Suzanne Leal, Garry Disher, Sue Turnbull, Andy Muir

Suzanne Leal 00:05

Welcome to our podcast Bad: All About Crime brought to you by Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival and the City of Sydney. I'm Suzanne Leal.

Andy Muir 00:13

And I'm Andy Muir. And each month we'll be exploring the big questions in crime and crime writing, subscribe to our podcast, then jump onto the Bad: All About Crime book club page on Facebook, to be part of the conversation. And thanks for listening.

Sue Turnbull 00:29

Welcome to the Bad: All About Crime podcast brought to you by the Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival and the City of Sydney. My name is Sue Turnbull. I'm chair of Bad Sydney and also Professor of Communication and Media at the University of Wollongong and Crime Fiction reviewer and judge and today I'm delighted to bring you another special presentation from the 2021 Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival. This is a recording of my conversation session with 2021 Ned Kelly award winner Garry Disher, entitled The way it is Now. I've had the pleasure of talking to Garry many times over the years about his work, in particular the series featuring a criminal called Wyatt, the Charllis and Destry series set on the Mornington Peninsula, and most recently, his series featuring constable Paul Hirschhausen, set in the region of South Australia, where Garry himself grew up, not forgetting, of course, his many standalone crime books. In this conversation, Garry reflected on his career, his literary influences, the importance of character and place, and also the question that drives the narrative. Not forgetting, of course, our discussion of rural noir, and the patterns that are beginning to emerge in this very Australian take on the contemporary crime novel. So I do hope you enjoy this discussion as much as I did. Welcome everybody to Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation as the traditional owners of this land and pay respect to their elders past, present, and emerging. I'm Sue Turnbull, it is my very, very great pleasure to introduce Garry Disher to you here today. We're thrilled to have him with us. We had him sort of with us in this room last year, but the internet was unstable. The sound wasn't terribly good. It was all a bit frustrating. But the quality of what Gary was saying was wonderful. We just couldn't hear it terribly well. So you've got the chance to make that all better this time around, Garry. And I suspect, I suspect everyone in this room will have read a Gary Disher. How many have read the most recent one? Yep, a few of those hands up

Garry Disher 02:57

Make a thoughtful Christmas present.

Sue Turnbull 03:01

What about the Wyatt series? Hands up? If you read Wyatt? Fabulous, hands up if you're a fan of Hirsch, they're here too. The Mornington Peninsula Series? Yep, yep. Yep. I think we've got them covered. What about the standalone? Because this is a standalone? Oh, yeah. Yep, we've got standalones here, too. So Garry, it's been an extraordinary career, you're, you're you've won so many awards and so many prizes and you're huge in Germany. I don't know if you know that but Garry is, you've won some sort of German prize too haven't you?

Garry Disher 03:36

Yeah I've won four German Best Novel awards?

Sue Turnbull 03:41

Why? What do you think? Is it? What is it about the German audience that that have picked up on? On you?

Garry Disher 03:50

I don't know about me, but nationally, they're very keen readers, keen book buyers and there's no sort of cultural cringe involved. They are very open to literature from overseas. I suppose there's perhaps the exotic appeal too but I would think that the exotic Australian setting wouldn't travel unless they were internationals. Universal themes I'm trying to say, because all crime novels are about love and hate and betrayal and they are, they travel everywhere. So but for whatever reason, they like my books, which is great.

Sue Turnbull 04:33

And and then of course, there's, as you said, the exotic setting, and we'll be talking about setting quite a lot later on. But I did say that we would acknowledge that initially you were going to be talking to Tony Birch and I wondered if you'd like to tell us what because you've read his short stories, his most recent short story collection, and I was really intrigued about the possibilities of that conversation between someone who was identified as an Indigenous literary author, and Garry, who comes from a very different section of the literary world. And we'll talk about that.

Garry Disher 05:12

But I would like to have asked Tony a couple of things. One is Hemingway's iceberg analogy, I don't know if you know it. But Ernest Hemingway said that the movement of a short story is like an iceberg, that there's only 1/10 showing above the surface and nine tenths under the surface, but still an essential part of the whole. And I was reminded of that when I read his, the short story collection that on the surface, just some very simple things are happening, simple conversations or simple interactions about about people, but under, underneath you have a sense of, of unspoken heartache for whatever or whatever it might be. So I was struck by that in those stories. And I'd like to talk to him about dirty realism. Dirty realism has probably had its day, but it was very influential. When I started writing short fiction, an American movement, popularised, I suppose, by Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Bobby Anne Mason, Tobias Wolff and some of those people. Whose subject matter was ordinary people but probably working class struggling lower middle class, trying to try and do better themselves, trying to make sense of a baffling situation they found themselves in, trying to battle through. And Tony's stories are a bit like that. But dirty realism had a bit of a bad name in Australia, because it was mistaken for in a suburban group, household grunge drug taking fiction, but it wasn't that at all. Someone used dirty realism as a label, which is perhaps an unfortunate label, but it's about ordinary people struggling to make sense of their lives and Tony's, stories are like that and I think perhaps, that appeals to me too,

because a lot of the characters I write about are ordinary people who've stepped up in some way. I'm not writing about super villain, villains, ever. I'm just writing about people who are struggling, and often they get it wrong and the repercussions of that.

Sue Turnbull 07:25

And, actually, that, there are two questions that come out of that for me, which is, does the iceberg analogy apply to your books as well?

Garry Disher 07:34

I think it does. I started my career as a short story writer, I probably published 40 odd short stories in literary magazines before I wrote my first novel, and implication, and suggestion are the big strengths of short, short stories. And I think I still use those techniques in the longer works, the novels, that that there are things going on, on underneath the surface that are hinted at by body language, by language, by conversation, and so on.

Sue Turnbull 08:07

And we should acknowledge here that that you said, you wrote short stories, and you were writing literary fiction at one stage. And there's this whole thing about the what is literary fiction, as opposed to crime fiction, and the blurry line between the two. And I've got a quote from you from one of your essays, which is a bit provocative, which says, "I think crime novels can tell us more about human frailty, and the world we live in than literary novels." Discuss.

Garry Disher 08:41

Okay. I wish I could go back and burn everything I've said in the past. But I think there's a lot of truth. It's assumed, I think, by too many people that crime fiction is junk fiction. We love to take it to our holiday house in summer and we leave it behind in the holiday house because it doesn't really have any value apart from that, apart from distracting us for a few hours when we're on holiday. But I think good crime fiction does tell us about the world we live in. It explores prevailing social tensions. It's about character and character interaction. It's assumed that it's if it's crime fiction, it's poorly written. But that's not the truth, as we know with with Peter Temple, who won the Miles Franklin, the premier Literary Award in Australia, with with his crime novel, was it it was Truce?

Sue Turnbull 09:36

Truth, it should have been the Broken Shore, but it was Truth.

Garry Disher 09:39

Yeah. So I would defend crime fiction on many, many levels. And I think it's why it's so popular. It's not because it's got car chases in it or or a puzzle about who, who bumped off the victim. It's about human interaction. It's about on one level there's an element of fear but to the God of grace of God go, I think we see people who've stuffed up their lives, for believable reasons and that we can identify with. And there's been a big shift in crime fiction too from the early days of Agatha Christie and those hardboiled Los Angeles Private Eye novels, where the main character was a cipher really. It's been said that Agatha Christie's Miss Marple was a super reasoning machine. She had no social context. But with Sara Paretsky, and other writers like her in the 80s and 90s. Suddenly, we had crime, main characters who were like us, crucially, they're not us because they fear, they tread we were we fear to tread, but they had messy love lives, they had stale cheese in the fridge. They're concerned about the welfare of

their aged parents, and so on. So that was a big shift in crime fiction, I think. And that's another reason why, why it's appealing because we can relate to the characters and what's going on.

Sue Turnbull 11:14

And we were just having a little chat before we started here, because I have an ongoing kind of vendetta with the Melbourne and he writes for the Australian, Peter Craven, who only ever refers to crime fiction as quality trash and I, I have just, I've just had so many conversations with him and debates with him in my head, about that whole thing that he's, he's devoted to the classics, and he cannot see that we're actually producing contemporary classics, that the Broken Shore is a contemporary, classic. And that, you know, many of your books, I think, would qualify Bitterwash Road is one of my absolute favourites of yours as it was the first of the Hirsch series, I think of capturing a particular moment in time. Let's, let's come to the latest book, because it's actually a return to the Mornington Peninsula. And I want to ask you a question, Garry, where's home for you?

Garry Disher 12:20

It's a nice little town called Balnarring on the Mornington Peninsula. Less than an hour and a half from the city depending on traffic. It's on the side of the peninsula that's not so busy in summer, the Port Sea, Sorrento, Mount Martha, Mount Elisa side of the peninsula, the bay suburbs are to be avoided in summer, but on the other side of, the Western port side, which is very quiet and low key in summer. I live on a dirt road about seven, eight minutes drive from the beach and I walk on the beach every day and I had to I had to walk on the beach with new eyes when I wrote this book because I took the beach, well I've never taken the beach for granted, it's different every day but I realised I wasn't seeing things. And so when I started this book, I walked with this with fresher eyes, I suppose.

Sue Turnbull 13:19

I don't often do this. Do you think you could do it? Could you read the first paragraph of that chapter? Just, just about the beach.

Garry Disher 13:28

So it's Christmas morning. Charlie was on the beach at 6:15. So was everyone else the older locals anyway, many of whom he hadn't seen since he was a kid. All were carrying themselves with a kind of benign, slow moving grace as they bless the day and each other. The murmurs and the stillness, the hazy colours along the horizon and the perfect, perfect glass like water. Charlie hated to breach it. So he didn't go in, just stood there on the sand with his towel. The beach as a cathedral he thought, morning prayers and benedictions. Usually the beach was implicit with loss. Lost coins, lost jewelry, lost virginity, lost lives, sand castles, footprints and hopscotch letters, loss to the clawing type water.

Sue Turnbull 14:13

That was just such a beautiful and poignant evocation of the beach and beach culture. So this is a standalone and you've returned to the Mornington Peninsula after being with Hirsch in South Australia for a period of time, which is also home too isn't it?

Garry Disher 14:33

Yes, it's wheat and wool country halfway between Adelaide and the Flinders Ranges. That's where I grew up and where I still have family.

Sue Turnbull 14:40

But you decided to come back to the Mornington Peninsula. Yeah,

Garry Disher 14:43

Well my publisher badly wanted another her straightaway after after Consolation, but I had to resist him, lovely bloke, but I had to resist him. I needed a break from Hirsch. I often do with books. I'd like to, I like to push at my own boundaries, but I like to try different things from year to year too. So I wanted to, I didn't want to write another big city novel, like, perhaps under the cold bright lights, which is set in Melbourne. So I thought for various reasons, I wrote about my second home, the Mornington Peninsula, the beach suburbs.

Sue Turnbull 15:26

So for those who haven't read the book, could you just give us a little synopsis of the, of what engages you? You've written somewhere else that every book, every mystery begins with a question, or every story begins with a question. What's the question here?

Garry Disher 15:42

Well, I suppose it's a quest novel, in the sense that the main character, Charlie Revin, he's a policeman in the Sex Crimes Unit but he's been suspended, because he got into a Barney with his inspector and pushed him over, over a desk. So he's on suspension, his marriage has broken up and he's gone back to the little shack at the beach where he grew up. And his father has since left there, but it's still in the family and he's got no, he's got time on his hands now and he wants to solve the mystery of his mother's disappearance. 20 years ago, at the same time, a little boy who's on, who'd been bullied at school camp, had run away from the camp, and is also missing. So no bodies just two missing people, coincidentally, at the same time, and so he sets out the quest to work out who what might have happened to his mother, because for 20 years, his father has been the chief suspect. Everyone thinks that his mother was murdered and murdered by his father, and he's keen to prove his innocence. I got the idea from, I get a lot of ideas from newspapers. I'm not interested ever in writing about the crime that the newspaper article's about. I use it as a springboard. But there was a story a few years ago in Melbourne of an elderly man taken to trial for the murder of his wife 20 years earlier, and there was a body and all the rest of it, but not enough evidence at the time. And apparently, for 20 years, his only child, a son, firmly believed he did it. So I was using a newspaper article, but also characterised as I think asked the question, what if? What if there were two brothers, one of them thinks dad's innocence, and the other one thinks dad's guilty? So that gave me the question that drove, drives the book? What happened to them? And how will? How will he discover it? And will he discover it? What the truth is?

Sue Turnbull 17:43

So had you got this worked out as a strategy and a structure and a plot before you started?

Garry Disher 17:51

Yeah, so some of my writer colleagues say they don't plan. They just start with a scene or a character or whatever, whatever it is write to see what happens. But I used to do that I think early in my writing career, with a literary, these so called literary short stories, and a couple of early novels. I like a quote from the Irish writer, Shauna Phelan, he said the need to be three elements present at the start, for the writer and the reader; a character, a situation and a promise. And that's how I wrote my early stories and novels, just to see a voyage of discovery to see what would happen. And I tried that with a first crime novel, The White Novel and it was a dismal failure. I had, I had my character written into a corner, and I didn't know how to get him out of it, I was relying on coincidence. So I realised I needed to stay a

step ahead of the story, a step ahead of the reader. I needed to plan, so now I'm a planner. I spend several weeks planning a crime novel, starting with the overall arch of the story and then refining it. And there will, there will be the stages and then refining it further, and they will be the chapters. That's how I write them.

Sue Turnbull 19:10

So you've actually, before you start, you've got a pretty good idea of how it's going to proceed and unfold because you've got two timeframes here that you're also dealing with.

Garry Disher 19:20

Yeah. Yeah, I have the whole book in my head before I start, basically. But yeah, it's written on two timeframes, so that the early couple of chapters are like five or six short chapters are set 20 years ago, when Charlie's mother disappears, and the little boy disappears from camp. And then we jump forward 20 years. Charlie is older and wiser and part of part of the tension for Charlie is that he can't work as a cop. Now he's on suspension. He wants to investigate, but he can't use the things the techniques that an ordinary cop a private detective can use because he's got no power anymore. So just I'm interested in, in conflict for characters, what, what's holding them back what's restricting them.

Sue Turnbull 20:14

It's also interesting too is, we were talking to Sarah Bailey this morning, and she was talking about writing something in 2005, when there weren't any platforms, and there weren't this, that and the other. There's a whole way in which policing has changed as a result of technology and it's whether you're on top of that, or whether you go back in time to avoid it.

Garry Disher 20:34

It's a it is a bit of a fraud issue for me, the role of technology in policing, particularly with with the Wyatt novels, because Wyatt, if you don't know the Wyatt novels, these are crime from the inside novels. They're caper novels. The main character's a cop, not a cop! A crook. He robs banks and payroll vans. And it's a struggle for me as a writer inside 2021. How do I have Wyatt pulling off a high tech robbery? When, you know, I need to spend several years researching how this high tech would work to be able to write it into the novel. So I think if I write another novel, another Wyatt novel it will have to be something something simple that he steals. I met that challenge with the one that is set in Noosa. He just breaks into a house and steals a painting, but I can't see him robbing a bank anymore.

Sue Turnbull 21:35

There's too many security cameras, you'd have to take those out first. It gets very complicated. Wyatt, of course, we've had quite a few conversations over the years and I remember it talking about Wyatt because he was inspired by the crime novels of Donald Westlake.

Garry Disher 21:52

That's right. Richard Stark, as he was called, his writing name for the for the Parker novels.

Sue Turnbull 21:59

So was that the inspiration for you to start writing crime the desire to emulate a particular style?

Garry Disher 22:07

Not to write crime, per se, no, I knew, I knew I always wanted to write crime because I loved reading it so much. But at the time, I was very, very fond of the Parker novels. I think there are about 15 of them. And Parker is a very hard boiled, yeah, he robs banks, payroll vans, or coin collections from coin shows or whatever it might be.

Sue Turnbull 22:28

And the Wyatt books are morally very ambiguous, aren't they? Because you're in this situation where you've got to get, your reader has to be on side with Wyatt, but Wyatt's a crook. So how can, how do you position the reader in relation to a character like that?

Garry Disher 22:47

Yeah, I do. I do get letters from readers saying I don't approve of Wyatt, but I want him to win. So I think I think books are tapping into that desire in us to pull the perfect crime. We've all you know, there's always someone we've wanted to bump off because they've done us wrong. Or we'd like to pull the perfect robbery. We don't of course. But I think these books tap into that desire. And but also on one level Wyatt has to also be a decent character. He'll kill people, if they've double crossed him. He's a killer. He's a very meticulous, cold, calculating planner of his robberies. But, you know, he's got certain standards, he's not a thrill killer. He won't deal with drugs, which makes these books totally implausible because that's where the big money is. So so that was important to me, too. But a rule of thumb for writing fiction is that you get to know your characters very well before you start to write. But I don't with Wyatt, he's a cipher. I have much, much more fun as a writer with the minor characters. Because they're fuckwits a lot of them and I have a great deal of fun with them. But But Wyatt we don't learn much about him. If, if I were to reveal that Wyatt had a bully as a father, that grew up in a broken home suddenly, Wyatt is vulnerable, and Wyatt's not Wyatt anymore. So we never ever learned much about him. There might be little, little touches. For example, in one of the books, I can't remember which one it is now, a job goes wrong and a female accomplices shot in the head, not fatally, but she's in a bit of a bad way and Wyatt being Wyatt isn't looking after her and nursing her because she's injured necessarily it's because if he leaves her behind, the police will grab her and learn about the case. But at the same time he has got this injured woman with him. And they hold it, holed up in a in a flat and she goes to have a shower, wash her hair or something. And he senses that she's struggling, because because she's been shot in the head, a grazing below. So he goes in and helps her wash her hair. So but that's about as much as we learn about the soft side of Wyatt.

Sue Turnbull 25:20

But it's it's such a compelling scene, I do remember that scene and you think, "Oh, God, he's human, too. I think I love him." You know, we kind of like the bad guys, you know, the but because he is honourable in a way. Yeah. You know, he's, he's, he's not a fuckwit. And he's not dishonorable, but he's, it's an honor among thieves, right?

Garry Disher 25:41

Yeah.

Sue Turnbull 25:42

Completely. So Challis and Destry. It was Hal Cha,lis who came first, wasn't it? In the series that originally were on the Mornington Peninsula. So that was a shift into a police procedural and the Dragon Man was the first one?

Garry Disher 25:57

Yeah

Sue Turnbull 25:57

That was, I'm thinking it was mid 90s and it was around the time that we were getting a lot of serial killer, that was the, the wave that was coming through then.

Garry Disher 26:07

Yeah. The the peninsula setting for the Challis novels, Challis and Destry novels was accidental, in the sense that I just moved down to the Mornington Peninsula, 1992 it was. And I thought I wanted to shift from Wyatt, I'd written six and six years so I wanted to a shift, so I wanted to write police procedurals. And I was influenced by because I think we all we writers build on a tradition. I was interested in the Inspector Resnick novels of John Harvey set in Nottingham. So I was interested in because he has an ensemble cast of characters, we see the public and private lives of the cops, major and minor crimes are investigating. It's not a, Nottingham is a city but it's not a major metropolis. But it's, but I thought, well, I'd like to write, so his sorts of books. And I thought I'd write about Melbourne, which I've only recently left, but I went went into the milk bar at the little town of Hastings on the west port side of the peninsula one day to buy lunch, and three or four women were ahead of me in the line, and women were serving. And they were all talking about having to take their daughters to netball practice by car now not daring to let them catch the bus because a serial killer operating in Frankston hadn't been caught yet. He raped and murdered three young women who were waiting at bus stops, etc. And I had this incredible sense of community fear, of community anxiety, of of how this crime has affected the lives of these, these mothers and their daughters, presumably the fathers too. But so I realised that, that's, that's where I wanted to set it.

Sue Turnbull 27:59

Yeah. And that setting. I mean, having spent time in the Mornington Peninsula, what I always loved was trying to work out where Garry Disher's fictional town actually was because you made Hastings, Waterloo. And even in this new book, I'm working up. Where are we now? Where's the real place?

Garry Disher 28:21

Yeah, well, the bad guy, I better not tell you who the bad guy is. It it refers to an actual public position. So I knew that I couldn't couldn't call it Balnarring Beach, Mirrick's Beach and Summer' Beach, so fictionalised the names of the towns. And I do that. One reason I why I chose to call Hastings, Waterloo, in the, in the books is because for fictional reasons I might need to create a building like a hospital or an event that doesn't happen in the real Hastings and it would confuse readers. So yeah, I fictionalise, where necessary for plot purposes, the rest of the time, I'll name actual towns like Mornington. Yeah.

Sue Turnbull 29:09

But then did you feel when you you know, there's, there's quite a lot of them. Challis and Destry, but did you feel that that series had run its course when you when you, you stopped and you moved somewhere else? I mean, would you write another one of those or do you feel as though you've you've done with those characters?

Garry Disher 29:27

I think there's probably one more Peninsula a novel and one more Wyatt in me. But yeah, I'd written a several of them and again, wanted a change and coincidentally, Michael Hayward, my publisher urged

me to think about a standalone and that was Bitter Wash Road, which turns out to be the first of a series but when I wrote it, it was intended to be a standalone. Yeah, and I'm writing about the area where I grew up, even though I left there basically when I was 18, or 19 to go to Adelaide University. I'm still excited to pull on my imagination. And every few books over the years I've gone back there. Yeah. Yeah. And you've also written and now, here we might, another little bit of a confession in the way in which our paths crossed. Garry undertook a PhD and wrote a rather fine thesis on rural Noir. I may say because I marked it. And because the novel that he submitted was was Peace wasn't it? Peace, Yeah.

Sue Turnbull 30:33

It was peace, so you know, like I was going to fail it. I mean, really. But you wrote this wonderful essay on rural Noir. And I wonder if you just like to rehearse a few of the arguments that you made there, because, you know, the term Outback noir has now been used, and a whole slew of Australian novels, not set in cities, have kind of been labelled there and you kind of showed that there was a continuity in the history of this kind of representation in Australian crime. So give them the Three Minute Thesis.

Garry Disher 31:08

The thesis is about recent, several recent Australian crime novels that might be termed rural, rural, or Outback noir, a term coined by a journalist who was writing about the phenomenon of Chris Hammer's, Scrublands, yeah, and Jane Harper's The Dry because they were immense bestsellers in Australia and overseas, and she, she saw it as a phenomenon. And I, I would like I like to argue that my book Bitter Wash Road came before both of those books so that there had been a bit of a tradition already. There's, there's always been rural crime fiction. But what struck me about Peter Temples, some couple of Peter Temples books, my book, Bitter Wash Road, Jock Sarongs novel Quota, set in a fishing village and a couple of others like that, is that the main character is an outsider. A total outsider like Hirsch who's a city boy whose through some indiscretion has been busted down to uniform and sent to a little one officer police station in the bush. So he's a real fish out of water, or Chris Hammer's Scrublands were the main characters a journalist sent to an Outback New South Wales town in the, in mid summer. Jane Harper's main character, Falk, is not a not a total outsider but he hasn't lived there for 20 years. So in a sense, coming back as an outside. So these characters have to, there's a twin elements of tension or suspense or stress for them. They have to learn about the place in order to solve the crimes as they also need to learn about the crime. So it gives a very useful layer of tension in these books. I think the fact that the main characters are outsiders, and some might only stay a very short time. Hirsch has been there for two or three years now I'm currently writing the fourth version. Also, these characters have a circumscribed home. If we think about Michael Connelly's Bosh, he lives in a house up in the in the California, in the hills above Los Angeles and he's been there in every book. That's where he lives. It's, he's firmly rooted to that place, is firmly rooted to the city because he grew up there. And he's firmly rooted to his home. But the characters like Hirsch, who lives in three pokey rooms at the back of a little house on the highway, which the front room of which is the police station, or Chris Hammer's character who stays in a motel, or Jane Harper's character who stays in in a room above the bar of the of the, of the local pub, they have a circumscribed home. I think one thing, one theme of fiction and I think I returned to it a lot in my books, is the search for a true home, a character trying to fit in somewhere and the true home could be a place or it could be the arms of a loved one. Or it could be just simple peace of mind. So I think I think a lot of my books are about that, someone who doesn't quite fit in, but wants to,

Sue Turnbull 34:39

But wants to and you've got that interesting situation which of being an insider, let's say that we're talking about the Hirsch novels, you know, because it borrows the town that is, you know this place intimately, but then you're coming back to it after a long time, so you do see it and the little bit that outsider. You know that return when, it's like coming back to something and seeing it for what it was.

Garry Disher 35:07

Yeah, I have often thought over the years since the first Hirsch novel, what? What sort of book would I have written if I lived there? All this time, I had never moved away. But yeah, like, the place exerts a pull on my imagination. I can see it and I can smell it. But each time I do go back, I'm seeing fresh things. I've seen the changes over the years.

Sue Turnbull 35:33

So another fourth Hirsch is on the way.

Garry Disher 35:36

Yeah.

Sue Turnbull 35:37

Okay, now, I came across, I want to talk to Garry about his writing. Because we know you walk on the beach every day. Do you do it first thing in the morning or middle of the day?

Garry Disher 35:46

Middle of the day

Sue Turnbull 35:47

Okay, so middle of the day. So you write in the morning? And am I right in thinking that it's blue biro handwriting on a foolscap legal pad?

Garry Disher 35:56

Yeah. There's a manuscript. Well, actually, it's the page proofs of this new novel. But my notes for today's session are in blue biro on this, on the back of it, so I recycled. So I write, I can't think through the keyboard very well. I can I can walk I can write very quickly longhand, I can do asterisks and notes to myself and arrows, little reminders on another sheet of paper stuff to look up. I often have my mobile phone next to me, so I can Google stuff quickly. But given that Telstra owns all the infrastructure, and given that we had a big storm a month ago, I've had no internet for three or four weeks. So I've amassed all these questions when I get the Internet back.

Sue Turnbull 36:48

So just as well, you're here then. Yeah and we weren't trying to catch you on zoom in in Balnarring. So alright, so morning, blue biro handwriting. Walk on the beach. And then you come back and then you type it up?

Garry Disher 37:05

No, not always. Sometimes I'll let a few days go by, right. But if I do type it up, it's in effect the second draft because I'm I'm rewriting as I go along, through typing.

Sue Turnbull 37:18

So how long would it take you from from whoa to go, to do, thinking about the Hirsch now. The new one.

Garry Disher 37:25

The new one I started probably two months ago. And I probably finished in May and submitted and then I'll get a readers report from the my editor. And then there'll be some rewriting to do. Yeah. It seems to be going well at the moment. But some of my books have been like getting blood from a stone. It's a struggle all the way along. Only a couple of times have I had a book that just sings on the page. The second Wyatt novel, Pay Dirt, I wrote in six weeks. Usually it's several months. Some of the some books, my psycho literary novel, The Sunken Road, took me about 15 years. I struggled with that for a long time.

Sue Turnbull 38:11

You know, actually, Garry, it's really reassuring, I really like hearing that. It's a struggle to write because I think you sort of assume when you read something that reads so beautifully and so eloquently and and sparingly and you think, "Oh God, that must have just been such a dream to write," but it's an actual struggle to get it back to that. That bareness as it were.

Garry Disher 38:35

Yeah, I like a quote from an American poet. He said this morning, "I put the hyphen in hellhound. This afternoon, I took it out."

Sue Turnbull 38:44

I think we're ready to take some questions from the audience or some from chat. If there's any coming through. It looks like we've got one on the chat already. Wow, that's terrific. Thank you very much. Okay, so maybe you've covered this already. But the question came through before your discussion. So we'll say thank you to the Zoom questionnaire. Which was how long does it take you to write a book? And the answer is six weeks or a year or 15 years? How often do you revise the first draft?

Garry Disher 39:21

Yeah, so there are two main drafts the handwritten one and the one I type, and then I print it out. And a lot of the editing then will be fiddly stuff. Every now and again, though, there'll be a major, I might make a major, major structural change. But usually by the time my editor gets it, it might be that'll be prepped by the fourth or fifth draft. By the time my editor gets it, it doesn't need a an enormous amount of work. Most of her editing is getting me to tighten up sentences or to flesh out a scene, that sort of thing. It's important to me to be as perfect as I can make it before I submit it.

Sue Turnbull 39:59

Yeah, I want to ask you a question because I was fortunate enough to have a discussion with an interview with Don Winslow, last year, I think it might have been last year. And he talked about the look of the words on the page that he actually, if he sees a page where there's not enough whitespace, he thinks, Okay, got it. I gotta cut that. So there's actually something about the look on the page. Does that affect you at all?

Garry Disher 40:25

No, but I understand it. Yeah. Yeah,

Sue Turnbull 40:28

I do, too. Got a question. In the front. The question is about the Charles renovating the de Havilland dragon in in the Peninsular books and is that an autobiographical moment?

Garry Disher 40:43

I only in the sense that I loved making model planes when I was a kid and when I moved down to the peninsula, near a nearby town Tiab, has a nice little airfield. And it has not an annual air show, but every two or three years, it'll have an air show. And often, it's vintage aircraft, that will be on show. And I saw de Havilland repeat or rapiday, I'm not sure how they pronounced it back then. And I thought, what a lovely looking old plane, and I could see Hal Challis, renovating it, restoring it, because that's what's happening in some of the hangars around this airfield, old planes being restored. That's where that came from.

Sue Turnbull 41:28

Lovely. Okay, we've got another one at the back. So the question is, does does Garry share his draft? And the answer is...

Garry Disher 41:35

No. A couple of times, I've shown the final draft before it goes to the publisher to a couple, a couple of friends over the years, but generally not. I would only ever show a draft to someone whose opinion I trusted and valued. I wouldn't show it to my mum, for example. You know, don't show it to a loved one who's going to automatically praise it. You want someone who will give you good hard feedback.

Sue Turnbull 42:04

Sorry, yeah, my son should listen to that. I get wrong when I give him good hard feedback. Your my mother! Okay, what was the biggest challenge to change from writing short stories to writing novels?

Garry Disher 42:21

Yeah, that's a really good question. My impulse to write novels came out of the fact that I couldn't afford to write short stories. I might spend several weeks on a short story get it, send it often magazine, it might get published, I might get a check for \$100. Or I might just simply get a free copy of the magazine. And I couldn't exist for very long as a writer doing that. So that's, and I suppose I was guilty of that, that feeling of new writers that the pinnacle is, is the novel. I don't think that anymore. I think the pinnacle of fiction writing is the short story. That's the ultimate for me, is a perfect short story. If you read anything by Alice Monroe, for example, wonderful short stories, or William Trevor or any of those people. As it so happened, when I started writing Steal Away, which was my first novel, it was published by Harper Collins, Angus and Robertson it was called back then, which is now a blockchain, but it was a publisher. I had been reading contemporary American fiction, and a lot of the, a lot of their novels were the few that I read that back then, were little episodic little fragmentary novels, built around fragments. There's a an American writer called Evan, I think it's Evan Connell, he wrote two novels called Mr. Bridge and Mrs. Bridge. And they're like little snippets, little scenes. Some might be two pages long. Some might only be a sentence long or a paragraph line long. They were like little stories, really. So in a sense, I was writing short stories moving from then to writing a novel that was in fact a lot of little short stories, or little scenes little snippets before I wrote a so called proper novel.

Sue Turnbull 44:19

I like that, a proper novel. Okay, we've got another question that came through the zoom. This is an interesting one, Garry, how do you form the female characters?

Garry Disher 44:37

I don't know. It's I'll have to say that I don't have many male friends. I feel uncomfortable in the company of men. Often, most of my friends are women. And I like the company. I liked listening to them. When I wrote *The Sunken Road*, which is also set in the wheat and wool country of the mid north of South Australia, it's not a crime novel. It's a literary novel. I wanted to do what Alice Monroe does in Canada, she writes about small town, small farm life in southern Ontario. I thought I wanted to do that. But in a novel, and my main character was going to be a farmer. And I wanted to tell his life story. But he, to use that horrible expression, he didn't speak to me, I couldn't hear him. I used to love going home to the farm, I still call it home, actually, I used to love going home to the farm and doing farm work with my father, for example, checking that the sheep troughs had water in them or fixing a broken fence or whatever it might be. But what I really loved was sitting around the kitchen table with my mother and my aunt and my sister, listening to the local gossip. So the lives of women. I realised then, I wanted to write about her, that woman, so the novel is structured, episodically or not in a fragmentary way as well. It's, I tell her life story from childhood to old age, over and over again in each little thematic section. So it's quite a departure from me. Most fiction is linear in structure. Time was chronological but I tried something different with it.

Sue Turnbull 46:24

Maybe this is why I like your male characters so much. They they they're not overt to the masculine. Is it possible? Could I hit on something there? How do you understand how the cops work?

Garry Disher 46:38

Well, I should say that some of it I simply make up. For example, Inspector Challis, realistically, he wouldn't be an inspector in a in a small regional police station. It'd be. It'd be a Senior Sergeant probably. But having said that, *The Hirsch* novels, I was drawing on my brother, my brother was a policeman. He's retired now. But he was a country cop. He tried to work on the farm with my father, but they had a great personality clash. So he became a cop, and he worked in outback towns. No far distant Outback, dusty town, so he's terrific to pick his brains. When I wrote the *Peninsula* novels, I went to the local police and I think the police often feel maligned. So they like it if someone shows a serious interest in what they're doing. So the the police at ah at the Hastings police station, there's a big uniformed branch, it was also a training police station. So there were Police Cadets there. There was, you know, small civilian staff, and a little little CID. That's called cru. Now I think of for detectives. So I got a glimpse from from that, but a lot of stuff I make up and probably I hope I don't get it wrong, but oh, and newspapers, I've I've been collecting newspaper clippings for years and years and years. That told me something about police culture, the bullying culture, the treatment of females, cops, corruption, whatever it might be, not because I want to stick the boot into the cops but it gives me a sense of ordinary fallible human beings and how that fallibility might show itself in a police force.

Sue Turnbull 46:42

Have you ever had any feedback from the police in the Mornington Peninsula? Does it, do they read your books?

Garry Disher 47:31

I don't know if they do, but I've I've had a couple of cops over the years say that they were like, they liked the books. So I'm not sure about the Peninsula cops.

Sue Turnbull 48:54

Okay, the question is about Cold Bright Lights, and the character of Allen All and whether he and the fact that he transgressed he crossed over and presented a very much more morally complex character and would would you return to him?

Garry Disher 49:10

Okay, good question. Very briefly, Eleanor, is and again I got from a newspaper clipping about the Victoria Police, attracting back recently retired detectives, to work cold cases to free the younger detectives for more active cases. And instantly when I read that article, I can see my main character, he's been in the police force for a very long time and he's but he's been retired for five years. He's, he's a bit bored. He doesn't know where he's going with his life. He lives in a complicated situation of big old house in Melbourne with his daughter. Lives in one bedroom, his wife sometimes lives in another bedroom and some other transients come and come and go. And I instantly saw him in my head when I read that newspaper clipping so I had my main character there already. He, we see all through the book, you know, it's a police procedural in the sense that he solved some cold cases. We see him investigating cold cases. But one of the transients in his house in a little room, little suite of rooms of the back is one of those old tumbled down two or three storey tenement houses you find in North County in Colton and North Carlton. He takes in a woman who's fled a violent husband with her daughter and is going through family court case. And, and Eleanor is helping her out. He takes in waifs and strays if you like and helps them out in their personal lives if you can. And this situation for this poor woman gets even worse. And he finds himself committing an ultimate step into the dark side. Yeah. I had to ask myself, though, is he like that all the way through when I first started the book? Or an undecided? No. Which meant then, the pressure on me as a writer, to get the reader to believe that he would take this ultimate step. So I just tighten the screws really?

Sue Turnbull 51:36

Yeah, that's making the reader believe. Yeah. And you do that so well in your books. I mean, Hirsch is so real to me. I don't know if people who are fans of Hirsch, the Hirsch the place, but it's the way in which you render the places real, you know, the observations, the the people on the beach that we see on the Mornington Peninsula. It's that extraordinary sense of place that you have. This is my last question to you. Are you, when you're writing a crime novel, obviously there is the character there is the story, but then there is the place. What do you think gives you more pleasure writing the people or the place?

Garry Disher 52:23

I think writing people. Yeah, I think I think characters matter more than plot, but I would, I would say that. I would say that many new writers and I used to teach creative writing for many years. Many new writers don't pay any attention to the setting. That in their books in their stories that manuscript drafts, the setting is static and in their heads as creative beings. The setting is static. Okay, two characters are having an argument in the lounge room about the state of their marriage. Okay, I better depict the lounge room okay, well, the curtains are drawn the televisions off. That's enough. But to me as a writer, there's never enough that the place that could be a room it could be even be Hirsch behind the steering wheel of these police Hilux will say something about the character and there's something about character interactions, something about the plot will influence them where necessary. So it's it is the

setting is always vital. Yeah. But I'm probably mainly interested in the interactions of characters. Yeah. But I think I've said this before, I probably said it a year ago with with the session. I was fortunate early in my career, I had a few short stories published and applied for a creative writing scholarship to Stanford University in California, is near San Francisco. And I was fortunate to win this scholarship. And I thought I'd I'd jump in the deep end and give a short story to be workshopped. And it was a simple short story about a young woman going into a pub, seeing her ex boyfriend across the the other side of the pub. And it's a very internal story. She decides. No, she's moved on. She's not going to go and see him. So it's a very slow moving internal story with a subtle shift in the character's perception at the end. Now there doesn't have to be a car chase. And the story got pulled apart by the class. There were 20 or no, they're only about 12 in the class. A woman aged in her 60s was the oldest and a kid from New York age 19 was the youngest. I was, I suppose mid 20s. Then a woman in the class whose opinion I trust, that she'd had several short stories published by The New Yorker, which was the pinnacle of achievement if you're a writer in the United States, well, even outside the United States. I think Frank Morehouse even writes about trying to get a story into the New Yorker. She said your writing suffers from sensory deprivation. And I was quite crushed. And I didn't know what she meant. So I took her to the pub, and she said the good writing makes pictures in the head. And the way to do that is to appeal to the reader's senses. She said, everything is in your head, probably. But it's not on the page yet. I don't know what that young woman looks like. I don't, I can't hear the jukebox in the corner, I can't smell the cigarette smoke, the layers of cigarette smoke in the bar. I can't taste the salt on the pretzels, etc. So it was the best, most powerful bit of creative writing advice, identify gaps. So now when I'm describing places, and even people, I try to appeal to the reader's senses because I think it brings them into the scene. If they can, if they can hear the sounds, if they can see the light quality, if they can smell, what prevailing odors or the wind or whatever, it brings them into it into the scene.

Sue Turnbull 56:00

Garry Disher you have brought us all into your craft and your novels and we are extraordinarily grateful to you for sharing all that information and that intelligence in all those amazing books that you have written over the years, thank you so much. I hope you've enjoyed listening to this session with author Garry Disher as much as I did in the process of talking to him at the festival. And just in case you're new to our podcast, our Bad Sydney Crime Writers Festival is held annually, and we also run events throughout the year. If you'd like to find out more, go to our website, www.badsydney.com or join our Facebook community or our book club. Stay tuned for the next panel episode with all the usual Bad: All About Crime podcast suspects, and do keep reading and talking crime.

Andy Muir 56:57

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