

HOW I BECAME THE MR BIG OF PEOPLE SMUGGLING

MARTIN CHAMBERS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Nick Smart is fresh out of school and looking to earn a bit of money before he begins his commerce degree. A gap year as a jackaroo in Australia's Top End seems like the perfect outback adventure – until Nick arrives at Palmerter Station and begins to learn that all is not as it seems. Along with the other employees, Nick finds himself a virtual prisoner on the isolated station. He has to learn the hard way about freedom and the many sides of human nature that operate when life itself is on the line.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Chambers was born in Perth, the son of two journalists. He is married and has two adult daughters. He has worked as a biologist, a tour guide, a whitewater rafting guide, a lab assistant, a publican, a kayak designer, a ferry skipper and in mineral exploration. Between episodes of cycling, kayaking, sailing or travel, he writes. He is the author of four novels and two non-fiction books, and his poetry and short stories have been published in various anthologies. *How I Became the Mr Big of People Smuggling* was shortlisted in the T.A.G. Hungerford Award in 2012.

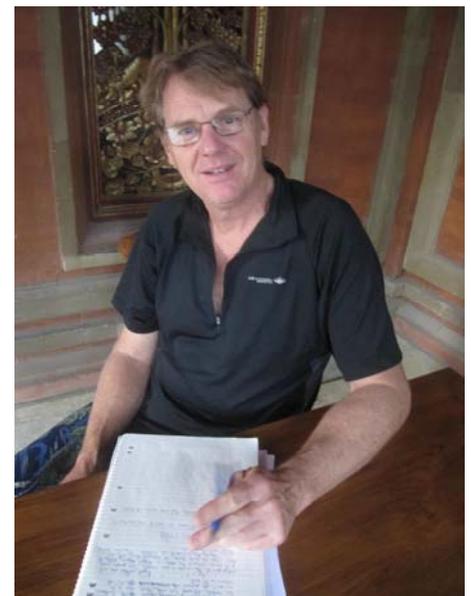
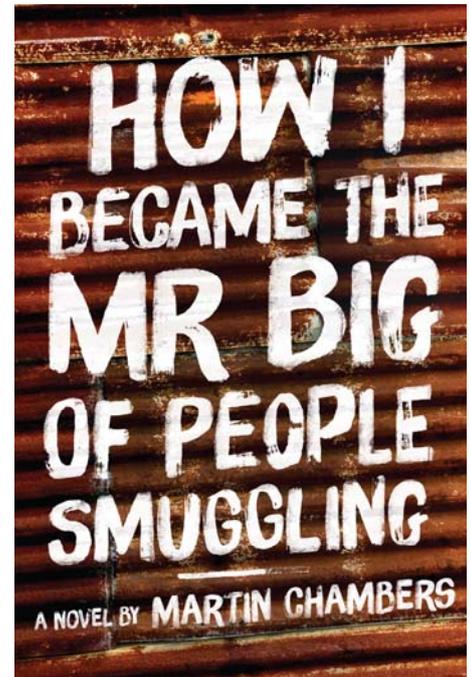
INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What gave you the idea to write this novel?

It was years ago during the search for James Annetts and Simon Amos, two young jackaroos who went missing from a cattle property near the Great Sandy Desert, and then four months later that their remains were found. They had perished while trying to get home and escape a job that was not what they thought it would be and for a long time I wanted to write about that. Not just about Jackaroos on stations, but all wet behind the ears school-leavers, who are shaped by that first job. MacDonald's, cadet journalist, apprentice plumber.

But for those two, what could have been so bad that they were prepared to risk their lives over a secret plan to leave? That was the question I wanted to write about and to do so I needed a cattle station with a nasty boss who would intimidate, and probably involved in something illegal.

Then some years later there was a story about another remote station that was owned by a mysterious Japanese group and was supposedly manufacturing saran out there. I sat with that idea for a while, then the idea of people smuggling came to me when I was sailing through Indonesia and we met some men on a beach. They asked us if we would take some people with us on our yacht. Sail them to Australia.



I knew immediately that this was the angle, because these men on the beach at Kupang, they were not evil or intimidating. They were friendly people. One even joked he had been to Australia four times, had been in jail, deported. They certainly did not see themselves as morally corrupt.

Is the topic of people smuggling something you feel strongly about?

More strongly the deeper I researched. I, like most people, only know what I read in the press. In researching this story I read about the Tu Do, a Vietnamese refugee boat now in the National Maritime Museum. It arrived in 1975 and it seems Australia had a much more humane policy back then. So this has been going on for a while, but we appear to be far more ready to vilify them now.

Recently my brother and I were in a fish and chip shop. The owner was Vietnamese man so I asked his opinion about refugees. Turns out he arrived on one of those boats in 1975, and when I asked him if he ever wanted to go back and he broke down, started crying. His pain is still real 35 years later yet we think we can solve the issue with a three word slogan.

What I feel strongest about is the distortion of the truth and the dumbing down of debate that our political system and media cycle seems to engender, from refugees to climate change to aged care or land rights. Self-interest takes over when we can lay the blame upon someone else or we are fed complicated issues in 30 second grabs.

Have you lived or travelled in the Top End?

I was born and grew up in Perth and I worked on mining camps in the Pilbara. Most of the time we were in isolated small camps, looking for gold, iron ore, or uranium. I think that is how my sense life on Palmenter Station developed. For one season I was based in the now abandoned town of Wittenoom that had a forgotten wild west feel to it. That is where the scene with the police visit and dope growing under the water tank came from.

I have travelled extensively around Australia including of course the top end. I once rode a pushbike into the Bungle Bungles and from there to Darwin. My companions left me at Kununurra and I kept going. Each night camped away from the road and it was spooky, dark and silent and it was the most scared I have ever been.

All of my stories are set in Australia and I hope with some sort of Australian character. That Top End character, and the landscape, that combines in a way that makes it only possible for the story to occur there. Australian writers are frequently told that to be international we have to set our stories internationally, but I don't accept that. It is not only that I have to write the book that only I can write. If I set a story somewhere I haven't been I don't think it would have that same realism.

Where did the character of Palmenter come from?

At the time I was writing this book my wife was having a hard time at her work, and a friend gave us a book 'How to deal with the work psychopath'. Turns out great businesspeople and psychopaths have many traits in common. That's where the 'I'll make a businessman of you' thing comes from.

I wanted to start with my lead doing something shocking and for a while the reader does not learn too much about Palmenter, who had to be revealed as the story goes on to be a pretty nasty piece of work. But Palmenter also grew into his role because as I wrote, I realised that there had to someone else even worse than Palmenter.

So there is the suspicion that Palmenter is not all bad. Or rather, but for a few strokes of circumstance Nick could have become Palmenter and we get to know that Nick is not so bad. That comes back to that thing of how we are shaped. By school bullies, by our first job, by being born in the lucky country.

Nick falls far short of the model of a classic hero – in fact he feels very real with his foibles and indecision. Is he based on anyone you know?

We all fluctuate between heroic and pathetic in different times of our lives. Maybe we don't get to the depths of villainy but in different circumstances, with something as simple as changing mood or lust or hunger. So just as there are worse people than Palmenter there are better people than Nick in the story, people he meets who maybe inspire him to change.

The classic hero lives in the black and white world and the thing of refugees, boat people, of so many moral dilemmas we face, none of that is clearly black or white. I think if I had the classic hero there wouldn't have been much of a story, or what story there was would degenerate into me promoting a point of view.

This book begins with a murder (and that's not giving anything away!). What were the challenges of unravelling a story that is basically told as one long flashback?

The book is structured like that because, as I said before, I wanted to start with my main character doing something pretty nasty and the reader not knowing what to think. Readers will form some emotion about a character, and they know that generally a lead will be the good guy yet here he is murdering someone. So it was important to keep some aspects hidden from the reader.

One way I solved that was to make it more elliptical than simply a long flashback. I think that is more real anyway, the idea being that as Nick tells the story he follows a thread until a point comes where something from the past needs explaining. And I took the view that Nick was narrating a story that had been on the front page of the papers, he was widely known as The Mr Big of People Smuggling, so he doesn't do much explaining.

The difficulty was that my readers, as opposed to Nick's readers, wouldn't know because they hadn't read the front page of the papers, so the challenge was that at every point I had to be aware of exactly how much Nick had told the reader and if required, I had to create some reason for Nick to reveal what was needed. Or, so as not to spoil what I wanted to be revealed later, sometimes I had to rephrase or choose words that were a little ambiguous. Another example is that someone disappears early on and to avoid revealing that this person is dead, Nick has to write about the past in the present tense, as if they are still alive.

So yes, it is a lot more difficult than simply writing a beginning, a middle, and an end.

You've had a long and varied career. What made you turn to writing?

I like to think that I have always been a writer and that I have simply had other jobs to pay for it. And it is true, I'd always be taking notes, keeping travel diaries or writing articles for magazines about things we had done.

After *The Canoe and Kayak Guide to WA* was published I had a job driving a wildlife tour ferry. Often after work we'd have a beer and talk about things, what had happened during the day, and we'd tell little stories of it. I realised in those conversations that the thing of a writer is not so much the putting of words on paper but the noticing of all that is going on around us and telling it as a story. With the encouragement of a friend who was in a writing group I wrote another book, *Island Life*, a sort of natural history mixed with anecdotes and some fiction. That was fun, and I rather foolishly thought fiction might be easier than non-fiction because I could make it all up. Boy, was I wrong!

But just as you couldn't write a kayaking guide to WA without years of kayaking experience, I think my stories could not be written without behind me all the things I have done. It comes in scenes, like the dope plantation under the water tower, or it is in characters or places, but more so the mood and feel of things. Writing is a giant puzzle of so many pieces with just as many that don't belong and the challenge is to work out what goes where. I love it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a character is Nick Smart? How does he change in the course of the novel?
2. How are we supposed to feel about him after the first chapter? Do our attitudes towards him shift?
3. What kind of a person is Spanner? How does he survive life on Palmenter Station, and how is he responsible for Nick's survival?
4. In what ways does the novel explore issues of legality and morality? Are these the same thing?
5. *There was no sign of Arif's body. He had been swallowed by the red earth. Gone. Buried by someone or eaten by ants and animals – it did not matter. I am sure Palmenter deliberately sent me out there so I'd see there was no trace of Arif and know exactly how much my body would be seen by others if he chose. Not at all.* (pp. 63–64) What kinds of things does Palmenter take from the 'imports'? Are these the same things he takes from his employees?
6. Is Nick right to murder Palmenter?
7. Palmenter says to Nick: *'If you're interested in commerce, you'll learn more here than in your classroom in the city. You stick with me, Son, and I'll turn you into a businessman.'* (p. 11). In what ways is people smuggling a business just like any other? Do you agree with Palmenter's, and then Nick's views on this?
8. How does Nick's attitude to the 'imports' change across time? Do his attitudes towards his 'business' change too?
9. How does Nick compare his own gumption or moral fibre to that of the imports?
10. What does the novel have to say about freedom and destiny?
11. *I never planned to be the Mr Big of people smuggling. That's what they call me. The Mr Big of People Smuggling. Trafficker in human misery. Well, my father always told me if you are going to do something, do it well.* (p. 138) What kinds of ironies are present in this statement?
12. Discuss some of Nick's epiphanies in the course of this story. To what extent does Nick take control of his own destiny? Once he is free to go, why do you think he stays on at Palmenter Station rather than just walks away?