

RIVER OF SALT

DAVE WARNER

ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1963, hitman Blake Saunders flees the Philadelphia Mob for a quieter existence in a tiny coastal Australian town. Life in Coral Shoals is perfect and Blake is a new man – running a club called the Surf Shack, and playing nights there with his surf music band, The Twang.

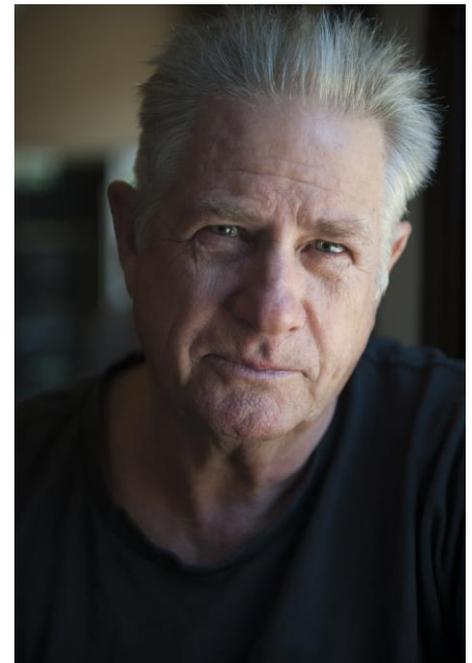
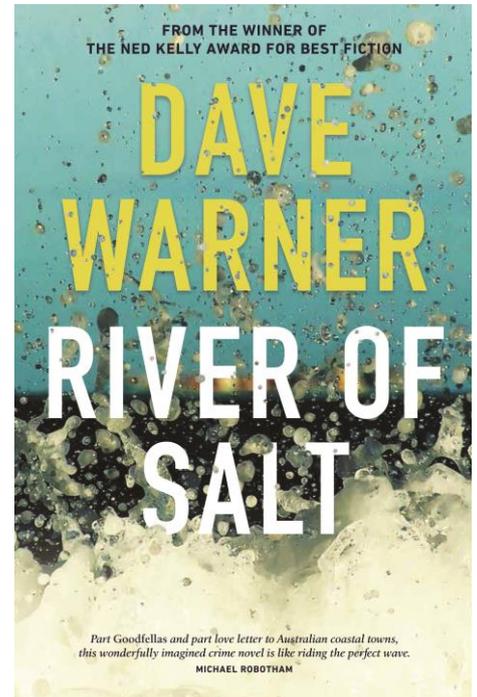
But then a young woman's body is found at a local motel, a matchbook from the Surf Shack on her bedside table. When Blake's friend is arrested for her murder and the local sergeant doesn't want to know about it, it becomes clear that it is up to Blake – a man who understands the business of killing – to protect his corner of paradise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Warner is an author, musician and screenwriter. His first novel, *City of Light*, won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award for Fiction. He is also the author of *Clear to the Horizon* and *Before it Breaks*, which won the Ned Kelly Award for best Australian crime fiction. Once nominated by Bob Dylan as his favourite Australian music artist, Dave Warner originally came to national prominence with his gold album *Mug's Game*. In 2017 he released his tenth album *When*. He has been named a Western Australian State Living Treasure and has been inducted into the WAMi Rock'n'Roll of Renown.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the novel called *River of Salt*?
2. How would you describe Blake's moral code?
3. Do you think he is right to make the choices he does to protect his 'corner of paradise'?
4. Why is 'paradise' such a difficult thing to preserve?
5. How do Blake's past choices continue to define his present?
6. What is it about this small town culture that thrusts Blake into the role of 'detective'?
7. When Blake has a chance encounter with an old Philly acquaintance at the Heads, what is the line he chooses to draw, and why?
8. Some of the novel explores the position of women in relation to men – as victims, or as individuals seeking to retain their agency. How does this play out for the female characters in this book? Why do you think this is a theme common to crime novels?
9. What are the differences between Kitty's and Doreen's expectations of life, and men?
10. In what ways does Kitty grow and change in the course of the novel?
11. Which women in the book achieve a kind of 'happily ever after'?
12. What is the role of the crime novel in restoring social order?
13. In some ways, being set in 1963, this novel evinces a kind of nostalgia. In what ways does the novel represent a simpler time? What elements of a changing world are evident in this novel?
14. In chapter 15, Blake and Doreen hear a Beatles track for the first time. Why has Dave Warner chosen to include this scene?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Why did you choose the early 1960s and, in particular, the era of surf music, as a setting for this novel?

The music chose the book. To explain. My very good friend and co-songwriter Martin Cilia, Australia's premier surf-guitarist, invited me to a gig by The Atlantics with whom he was playing. As I was listening to the music my head began filling with images of 60s movies like *Ride the Wild Surf*, *Gidget* and *Annette Funicello* movies, and I thought, wow, what a great time-scape in which to set something. My first inclination was a TV series and I wasn't sure if it should be comedy or crime but eventually I got around to thinking about a crime novel set in that world.

Did the location and setting help establish the parameters of the story and its characters?

Yes, to an extent. Once I knew I wanted to do a dark mystery set in the world of 60s beach culture, I needed to populate the world with characters, and Blake just announced himself. I love the idea of a man trying to escape his (violent) past by surfing and playing twang guitar. But I wanted a slightly different feel and tone to this book, more episodic as if each chapter was almost a short story. I think at the time I was in the thrall of the TV show *Madmen*. The way that could use the past (as in 1960s), different POVs, and its slow burn all appealed.

Doreen and Kitty both think about their role as women from different generational perspectives. Was this an aspect of the era that you set out consciously to explore?

No, I just let the characters take me where they were heading but I'm old enough to recall the late 50s and early 60s and I can clearly recall the sudden division that emerged between those born pre-war to those born after. This was especially so for women: bikinis, the length of skirts, the pill, the expectations women had from the world seemed to shift much more dramatically than for men, and so it felt right that Doreen and Kitty should embody this – although Doreen is probably not your 'typical' girl of her era anyway.

Which character was the most fun to write?

The main characters were all fun. The moral struggle for Blake gave me some great clay to construct his humanity, Nalder was fun because he feels very real to me. He's not likeable but he's not a villain either. He is vulnerable like everybody else. Doreen is fun because she is a very strong woman who is trying to balance pragmatism and romance. Kitty was the most challenging because her journey is the biggest and well, I'm not a woman, but as a boy I spent a great deal of my life with women and you see and take in a lot at the time, even if doesn't all make sense to you.

Can you see further adventures for the crew of Coral Shoals?

While I did not conceive this as a series, there are a number of threads left hanging at the end. Will the Mob come visiting is one very clear question.



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