

THE COVES

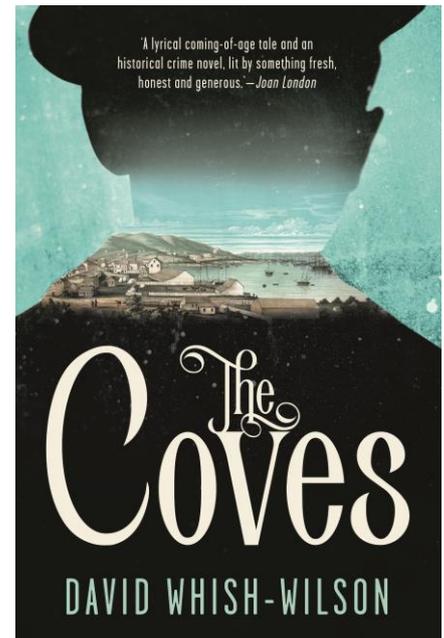
DAVID WHISH-WILSON

ABOUT THE BOOK

'Welcome to California, son. Sydney-town will dirty your mind and sully your virtue. She'll teach you things you wished you didn't know. She'll steal your maidenhood. Let me stand you a drink.' (p.38)

San Francisco, 1849: the hills are swarming with desperate men come from all over the world to seek their fortune in the grip of gold fever. By the middle of the century, nearly one quarter of the population is Australian, and includes many former convicts, who are quick to seize control in a lawless world. The gang, known as The Coves, is headed by stand-over man Thomas Keane, an efficient and ruthless opportunist.

Enter twelve-year-old Samuel Bellamy, formerly of the Swan River Colony, lately of Van Diemen's Land, in search of his mother who, last he heard, has gone to join the molly-houses in California. Sydney-town, San Francisco is a world of turmoil, loyalty and violent betrayal, and Samuel must learn to behave like a Cove if he is to survive.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Whish-Wilson was born in Newcastle, NSW, but grew up in Singapore, Victoria and WA. He left Australia aged eighteen to live for a decade in Europe, Africa and Asia, where he worked as a barman, actor, street seller, petty criminal, labourer, exterminator, factory worker, gardener, clerk, travel agent, teacher and drug-trial guinea pig. He is the author of three crime novels in the Frank Swann series, the most recent being *Old Scores*, with Fremantle Press in 2016. His non-fiction book, *Perth*, part of the NewSouth Books city series, was shortlisted for a WA Premier's Book Award. He lives in Fremantle and coordinates the creative writing program at Curtin University.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Who were the Sydney Coves (aka the Sydney Ducks)? What sort of person becomes a Cove?
- How do the influences of convict and colonial Australia manifest in the goldfields of California?
- Do you think there is something particularly Australian in the 'business model' deployed by the Coves?
- What difference does it make to the novel to have a twelve-year-old protagonist?
- What kind of boy is Samuel Bellamy and what is it about him that enables him to survive his adventures?
- What sort of a childhood has Samuel Bellamy had? Has he been able to experience 'childhood' as we know it?
- What is the spiritual and actual significance of the *noorn*, the black snake, that enters the Magistrate's hut, and which appears often in Samuel's dreams?
- If men have certain ways of being successful in Sydney-town, then women have another. What do characters like Sarah Proctor, Ai and Mrs Walker do to get by in this world?
- Do you think that sex is the only form of commerce for a woman in this town?
- Is it possible for a woman to be successful here?
- What does Clement mean when he advises Samuel 'not to get his hopes up' even if he finds his mother (p.78)?

- Is Mrs Walker really Samuel's mother? If Mrs Walker is *not* Samuel's mother, then why does she pretend she is?
- What kind of a man is Thomas Keane, leader of The Hounds? How would you describe his moral compass?
- **The Chinaman seemed to understand the importance of pretending by his manner toward Sam, merely a boy—but a boy sent by Keane and therefore a fellow of Sydney-town. Sam's role was to pretend a confidence by virtue of his race, itself a lie and a performance that the Chinaman was playing along with. But while it felt good to pretend, Sam suspected that he'd never be like Keane and his men.** (pp.66–7). In Sydney-town, appearance is everything. Why is this so?
- If Sam is vulnerable, he is also protected in a number of ways. Who are some of the characters that show him kindness along the way? Why do you think they do this?
- San Francisco is a melting pot of cultures, religious persuasions, and geographical allegiances. It contains Mormons and Mexicans, Chilenos and Chinese, Peruvians, French, Indians, Russians, Bostonians and New Yorkers, and of course Australians from a range of colonial outposts. What politics and tensions are at play in and around Sydney-town? Is it possible to say who is ascendant, or to define a hierarchy of power?
- What is the difference between the Democrats and the Nativists? Why is there such anti-Australian feeling amongst the latter?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What was it about the Sydney Coves that made you decide to write a novel about them?

I'm fascinated by history, and the forces of history that shape the present. When I hear a story from our collective past that is new to me, and that I feel should be more widely known, I'm often drawn to write about it. I have a long-standing interest in the various goldrushes that took place around the world, and in particular how that roving society of miners, merchants and sex-workers changed the societies that came into contact with them. That early San Francisco was so marked by an Australian flavour intrigued me, as did the overall poor reputation that attached to those from Australia. As is often the case, the more I looked into it, the more interesting the world of *The Coves* became, until I knew that I had to put something down on paper.

How close to historical fact is your portrayal of life in San Francisco in 1849? Did you learn anything surprising in the course of your research?

It is all based on historical fact and incident, even if I've amalgamated various characters and played with the temporal aspects of the period to better suit the needs of a historical crime narrative. For example, the first thoroughbred horse in California was indeed named Black Swan, and was imported to race a Californio pony. Yankee Sullivan was a real figure who died in a San Franciscan prison cell. The first great fire of 1849 was indeed blamed on Australian crime figures. I was lucky enough to spend some quality time in the library archives over there, reading accounts of the period, and came home with a great deal of interesting material, only a fraction of which I could use in *The Coves*.

The Coves is an adult novel, with a child protagonist. Why did you choose to make Samuel Bellamy twelve years old?

While it's true that attitudes toward childhood in the mid-nineteenth century were vastly different to those held now, in the sense that for a majority, childhood as a period of innocence and being shielded from the harsher realities of labour and exploitation were largely absent, I think that a 'child' figure has a unique perspective when it comes to representing a new society in a new territory. Because Samuel is doubly an outsider, as both an Australian and a child, he is better positioned to observe and take note of the world around him than those who are caught up in trying to survive and who are necessarily living in the moment. He has an enquiring mind and so is therefore interested in the smaller details and stories that are important to any narrative.

The book ends with the promise of a new adventure. Would you consider a sequel to this novel?

I'm interested in the fact that so many of the Californian goldrush population soon after migrated to Victoria, and then Otago, and that everywhere this rough and ready population went they changed society for the better, forcing those societies to become more democratic and lending some of their egalitarian and working-class political flavour to the present. Some even ended up in Kalgoorlie during the goldrush of the 1890s. As a result of my enduring interest in the period, and in Samuel Bellamy as a character (I often catch myself wondering what will become of him), I think that there might well be a sequel at some point.