

## TRUE WEST

DAVID WHISH-WILSON

### ABOUT THE BOOK

After betraying the Knights bkie gang, Lee Southern flees south to the city. Working as a rogue tow-truck driver in Perth, he learns that his father, whom he thought dead, is awaiting trial for the murder of the president of the Knights. When Lee is captured by right-wing extremists, he is forced to commit crimes to ensure his father's safety. The Knights want him back, but the neo-Nazis want to keep him, because Lee is in possession of information that makes him valuable – if only he knew what it was. As his captors seek to gain control of the state, Lee becomes an unwilling participant in an ambitious cold-blooded crime.

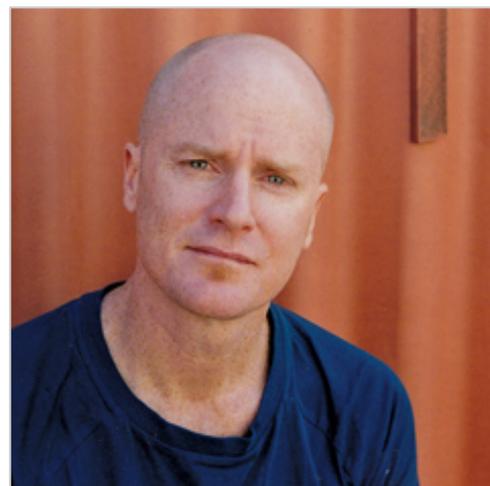
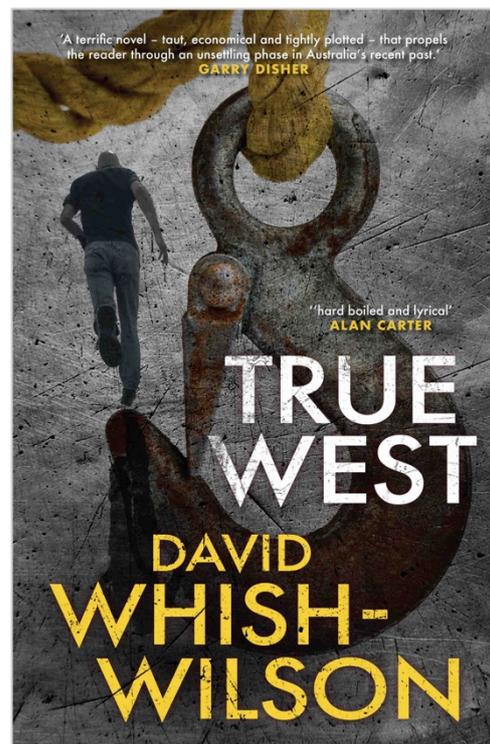
This novel is set in late 1980s Perth against the backdrop of hate crimes associated with Jack van Tongeren's Australian Nationalist Movement that included the firebombing of Asian businesses, as well as the dog-whistle comments made by then federal Liberal opposition leader John Howard associated with 'slowing down' Asian immigration.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Whish-Wilson was born in Newcastle, NSW, but grew up in Singapore, Victoria and WA. Aged eighteen, he left Australia to live for a decade in Europe, Africa and Asia. He now lives in Fremantle and coordinates the creative writing program at Curtin University. He is the author of *The Summons*, and three crime novels in the Frank Swann series: *Line of Sight*, *Zero at the Bone* and *Old Scores*, with a fourth, *Shore Leave*, to be published in 2020. His non-fiction book, *Perth*, part of the NewSouth Books city series, was shortlisted for a WA Premier's Book Award. His historical fiction, *The Coves*, was published by Fremantle Press in 2018.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is a noir crime novel and how does *True West* fit this genre?
2. How does Lee's relationship with his father change over the course of the novel?
3. What makes Lee come to question the informal education provided to him by Jack Southern?
4. What effect does Lee's mother's absence have on him? How does his sense of her change as the novel progresses?
5. What is the 'threat' that Jack has prepared himself and Lee for? To what extent is it grounded in reality?
6. What difference does Lee's new understanding of his cultural heritage come to have on his identity?
7. What is it about the tow-truck industry that makes it a site for subversion and organised crime?
8. Are the worlds of women and men depicted as essentially different to each other in this novel?
9. At seventeen, Lee lives in a tough world. What aspects of comfort, reprieve or redemption does it contain?
10. What is the place of drug use, and attitudes towards it, in the world that Whish-Wilson depicts?
11. What are the implications for Lee in his involvement in the home invasion with Brad?
12. What parallels do you see between the attitudes of the far-right activity depicted here in the late 1980s, and now, thirty years on?
13. How can one resist or fight such attitudes when they belong to 'the enemy within'?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***What was your inspiration in selecting the subject matter of this novel?***

When I was teaching creative writing in Casuarina Prison back in the 1990s, one of my students told me that when he got out of jail he was signing back on as a tow-truck driver. When I asked him why, he said that tow-truck drivers see everything and know everything that's going on due to their particular outlaw links and needs for close observation. It seemed to me that this perspective might be a useful one for a runaway boy coming to the city for the first time, seeing an opportunity but coming up against an already existing organisation that is in reality little different from the organisation he has run away from.

### ***In your author note, you describe the historical period that this novel reflects as containing figures who were at the margin of society. Do you believe that such outliers nonetheless have the capacity to affect what is taking place in the mainstream?***

There's that old saying: there's two kinds of power – organised money and organised people. Even marginal ideologies, when placed in the hands of ruthless and determined people, can have an effect. There is some evidence that apart from the manifest social harm that Perth neo-Nazism caused in the 1980s, there was also an impact on Asian business investment into the WA economy.

### ***Do you think that there are parallels between Perth of the late 1980s and the Perth/Australia of today? Was it your intention to draw attention to these when writing this book?***

Yes, it was my intention. The propaganda of the 1980s was blunt and crude (posters, rallies et al) due to the limited technology of the period. It is much more insidious now due to social media platforms and the instantaneous nature of online communication and live streaming. What hasn't changed is the aggrieved sense among some sectors of the population that they have been left behind – that they are missing out and that they are being neglected – that multiculturalism and identity politics have somehow diminished their place in the world, and that they are under threat and so must take drastic action. That this previously marginal view has become mainstream in Europe and the US, and to some extent in Australia, thanks to the words of opportunistic politicians, is extremely troubling to me. It is, essentially, playing with fire.

### ***Your crime fiction is often set in the recent past. Do you think that such crime fiction has an important role to make as a cultural contribution beyond being a well-plotted tale?***

I am interested in all history, ancient and recent, but it seems to me that the recent past often has the most to say about the present, in the sense that its consequences are usually directly linked and manifestly visible. It is also accessible history in the sense that many players are still alive and can be interviewed – my favourite kind of research when dealing with subjects that often aren't well documented.



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