

## FROMAGE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

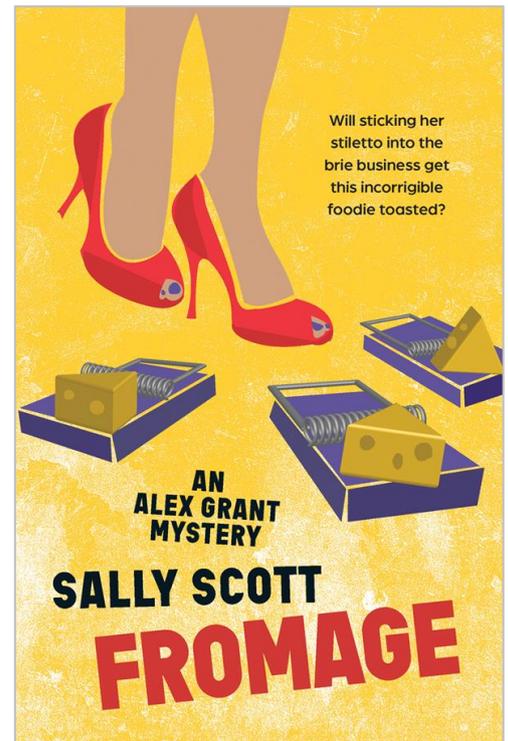
*Fromage* is a murder mystery with a difference: food is the murder weapon. Set in 1990s Western Australia, and featuring journalist and epicurian, Alex Grant, this first novel in the series sees our heroine on holiday in Croatia where she is discovered by Marie – an old school friend bent on matchmaking her friend with her aesthetically challenged brother Brian. To aid this liaison, Marie insists Alex accompany her to a family funeral in Split. This sets in motion a wild ride that takes Alex to the beaches and creameries of Margaret River in Western Australia. Travelling the roads of the South-West in her mother's beat-up jeep, Alex stumbles into the delicious arms of Brian's cousin Marco while unearthing drugs, murder and a vicious old crone determined to hobble the well-shod feet of Alex Grant.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Scott was born in the shadow of Mt Roland in Sheffield, Tasmania and wrote her first novel as an eleven-year old. It was a *Famous Five* pastiche and every word was precious. She kept writing until an arts degree led to experimentation with short stories. None of them were publishable, but all were joyous to write. Then 'adulting' happened and Sally's creative writing gave way to articles, papers and grant applications and a life as an academic. After lapsing from teaching, she worked at a weapons systems contractor and then at a gaming machine testing consultancy. After eight years interstate, Sally returned to WA to do a last hurrah at Curtin University before establishing her own business development consultancy in the engineering and construction sector. August 28, 2018, became known as Tits-up Tuesday: a breast cancer diagnosis. There's nothing like a boob going bust to focus the mind and Sally has been writing almost every day ever since. Creativity became part of her medicine. *Fromage* is the first novel in the Alex Grant series and she is currently working on the second, *Oranges and Lemons*.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is it about Alex Grant's personality that brings her success and disaster in equal measure?
2. In what ways does she resist being a conventional female protagonist or heroine?
3. Who are the most important relationships in her life?
4. How would you describe Alex Grant's relationship with food?
5. Why is she undeterred in her passion by the grisly deaths-by-cheese that she witnesses?
6. In what ways and via what peculiarities does this novel recall the 1990s?
7. How is Alex's snooping aided or restrained by 1990s technology?
8. This novel is a light-hearted murder mystery but the opening scene contains the damaged bodies of young men on the Croatian coast. What kind of comment do you think Sally Scott is making by choosing to include this detail?
9. *Coming from Perth at the bottom of the world, I didn't understand how humans could kill and maim each other for cultural and territorial advantage.* (p.8) What difference do you see between these damaged men and the men in the Puharich clan? Do you think that Scott is making a distinction between them?
10. How does the author use humour to undercut violence in this novel?
11. Do you think that cosy crime and mystery stories can still convey a serious message?



12. What role do the *babas* play in this novel and what do you think the author might be saying about their fierce loyalty and the protective instincts of mothers in general?
13. What elements of humanity do we discover in the odious Brian?
14. What other ways might it be possible to be killed with or by cheese?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### **Did the character of Alex Grant arrive fully formed? What (dare I ask) does she have in common with Sally Scott?**

My heroine was always called Alex Grant. So, the name came first and then I began to imagine the type of woman who would have this name. I wrote my first Alex Grant novel – not this one – in 1998. Through the writing process, I discovered more and more about her as I put her into often ridiculous situations. I immediately knew a few things about her: she was a journalist, went to a private girls school, and lived near the beach in Cottesloe in Perth, WA. I think I knew more about the type of woman I didn't want her to be: not hard-bitten or cynical with multiple horrible divorces/de facto relationships, and no angry children. In order for me to be able to live with her through a succession of books, I needed to like her. Thus, Alex is happy with her life: single, a comfortable size 12, with a drop-dead sexy best friend and a shoe collection the envy of women who covert Baby Janes. There are only two things I have in common with Alex: I'm happy and I have a serious addiction to shoes. Eight pairs of red shoes, anyone?

### **Much of the architecture in particular feels very real. Did you do a lot of research on location?**

My research was based on what I could remember of 1990s Perth. This worked as a good starter before I began collecting material to fill in the gaps of my memories. I set up a detailed lever arch folder (I don't use technology) with pictures of houses, fashion and locations from the 1990s. Photos of Perth and Cottesloe Beach and a local history of Cottesloe gave me a significant amount of material that verified what I remembered. I also found old road maps so I could make sure the trips Alex was making could actually happen. Finding the location of telephone towers was one of the more obscure pieces of research. Local history was really important, particularly around the wineries that were in business at that time. Most of my research was less about architecture and more about the technology of the time, which was very important because Alex loves the latest models of televisions, phones, computers and audio equipment.

### **What do you know about cheese you didn't know before writing *Fromage*?**

I knew nothing about the manufacture of cheese or the science behind it. I found some wonderful websites on this, but it was amazing how many manufacturers didn't put up their processes because of intellectual property rights. There were no makers of artisan cheeses who were willing to reveal their maturing and ripening process. When I visited a creamery, people were happy to talk about the ingredients and the mechanics of making cheese, but no-one was prepared to share the elements they felt gave them an 'edge'. The best information I found on the artisan cheese business was via the Paris cheese fair website. This made me aware of the politics behind cheese and how ferocious the competition between cheesemakers has become as markets expand. People have been murdered over the stealing of intellectual property, and envy. The secrecy around the cheese business was a surprise to me and I felt it had to go into the book.

### **What made you set part of this novel in Croatia? Do you have a connection to that culture?**

I have an extensive circle of in-laws who are Croatian and I've travelled across the country. I absolutely love Croatia and my relatives are wonderful people. It was during a visit to Tito's Island (the President who ruled over the unified Yugoslavia) that I began to think of the war and the level of corruption that followed. The growth of a Croatian-style mafia became apparent during the 1970s and I thought this would make an interesting angle. The 1992–94 war with Serbia was a radical action that completely transformed Croatia. There are many young men deeply scarred, physically and emotionally from the conflict and it split families, which have never recovered.

## **What's next for Sally Scott and for Alex Grant?**

Sally Scott is going to keep on writing. Cancer reinforced how crucial words and stories are to my physical wellbeing. I knew they were important to my emotional wellbeing, but I hadn't appreciated the link between my physical health and the creative process. I really like Alex and having her happiness living in my mind has been hugely therapeutic. Alex has since moved on to another adventure. Once again, she uncovers people killed by a food-wielding murderer. Thirty thousand words into the next novel, there are bodies who have come off second best in a fight with citrus fruit.

I will never stop writing – it's now a daily practice. Another series is percolating as well as a stand-alone crime novel set in regional Australia.