

## THE SAWDUST HOUSE

DAVID WHISH-WILSON

### ABOUT THE BOOK

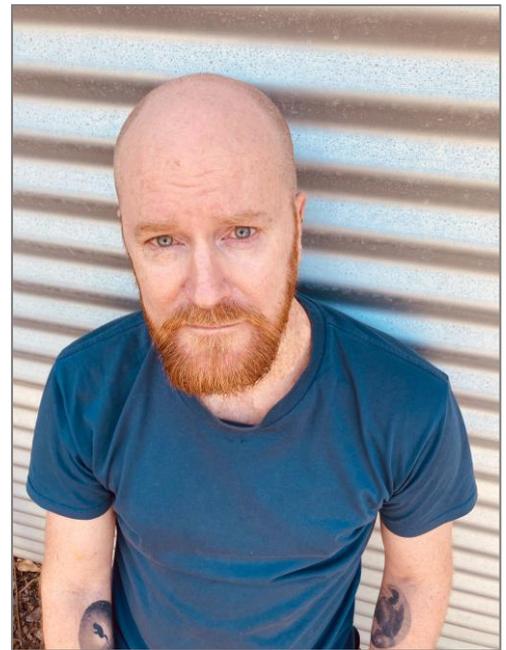
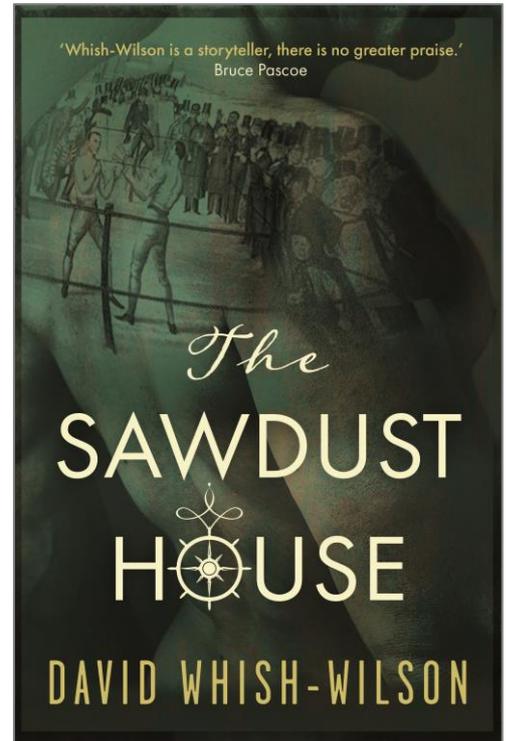
For lovers of historical fiction, this is a beautifully crafted work about one of Australia's most famous convicts. In San Francisco, 1856, Irish-born James 'Yankee' Sullivan is being held in jail by the Committee of Vigilance, which aims to rout troublesome Australians from the town. As Sullivan's Australian wife seeks his release, and his fellow prisoners are taken away to be hanged, Sullivan tells the story of a daring escape from penal servitude in Australia to become one of America's most celebrated boxers and how he met the one true love of his life.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David's first novel in the Frank Swann crime series, *Line of Sight*, was shortlisted for a Ned Kelly Award in 2012. David wrote *Perth* for the NewSouth Books City series, which was shortlisted for a Western Australian Premier's Book Award. His historical fiction novel *The Coves* is set in San Francisco in 1849. David teaches in the prison system in Perth, and previously in Fiji, where he started its first prisoner writing program. He lives in Fremantle, Western Australia and also teaches creative writing at Curtin University.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this novel called *The Sawdust House*?
2. Why does the novel include an epigraph from Muhammad Ali? What connection did Ali see between black Americans and the Irish?
3. How does Yankee's description of boxing in the prologue flow through the novel as a metaphor?
4. What is the structure of this novel?
5. How does this structure impact how we receive the story?
6. What difference does it make to the story that actual historical documents are included in its pages?
7. What is the role of Thomas Crane, Mormon newspaperman, as the person who writes down Yankee's story?
8. Why do you think that Crane is drawn to Yankee Sullivan and what does he learn from him?
9. What is the role of Adelaide in this novel?
10. What elements of friction existed in San Francisco in 1856? Are the unfolding events in the prison a microcosm of these?
11. Why is Irish-born James 'Yankee' Sullivan sometimes called 'the Australian'?
12. What do you make of this transferrable kind of national identity and how Australian convicts might be regarded, in Australia and beyond?
13. How would you describe Sullivan's relationship to boxing?
14. Why do you think this novel ends where it does?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***Your novels all have been set in real time and real places. What makes a story from history worth retelling?***

As a younger writer, I was very influenced by friend and mentor Kim Scott's early approach of using fiction to write into gaps in the historical record. I'm looking at gaps in a very different kind of history, but the approach is something that is useful, aiming to use the persuasive and immersive tools of fiction to fill out a picture that contains plenty of silences. Fiction, in its paradoxical way, can certainly feel like the truth, and by way of condensing and reordering, it can also be truthful to the historical record. This is something that I find attractive when inspired by curiosity to research into a historical figure – as in this case – or into historical practices and the enforced silences around them, as is the case with much of my Perth-focussed crime fiction. This mix of presence and absence in the historical record is what I find initially fascinating, and then, when it comes to writing, questions of relatability and contribution to broader narratives become important. In this case they led to questions about early convict history and the largely unknown Australian contributions to the American story.

***Where did you first hear of Yankee Sullivan and what drew you to tell his story in particular?***

I first came upon the character of Yankee Sullivan while researching my earlier novel, *The Coves* (2018), which was set in 1849 gold-rush San Francisco, featuring the largely unknown story of how a cast of Australian criminals had taken over organised crime in the nascent city, until they pushed things too far and a vigilante committee was organised to rout them from the town. The routing was unsuccessful in the first instance, and 'Australian' became something of a dirty word in California, a synonym for all kinds of vice and depravity. The character of Yankee Sullivan played a small role in *The Coves*, but I sensed there was more to his story than the lurid media accounts and self-mythologisation he employed (understandably, as an escaped convict), and this was confirmed to me when I began to dig deeper. Nobody seemed to know his real name, for starters, but with a bit of detective work I was able to learn much of his early story, beyond the figure of the colourful rogue that he cut in the US, which just made him more interesting to me. I discovered his court records at Old Bailey online (a terrific resource for researchers), and the writing began to follow the amateur sleuthing from there.

***Why did you choose to tell this story in the way that you have?***

I wrote this novel slowly, and in fits and starts, over many years. My aim wasn't just to inhabit a character, or characters, but a kind of language – the loose, indeterminate, polyphonically evolving English of the mid-nineteenth century. For me this was the pleasure of both the research, and also of the writing. I wanted to start from the position of Yankee Sullivan, in a San Franciscan prison cell; a man who'd lived rich lives in four different countries, who had a vivid public persona but also a troubling personal history of poverty and institutional abuse, whose past and immediate future are crashing together. I wanted the structure of the novel to reflect this fracturing and unpredictable flowing of thought, moving backwards and forwards through time but also towards and away from his engagement with his main interlocutor, Crane. I wanted to approach his understandings and his experiences somewhat aslant, as a reflection of his position and psychological state, and the structure I chose seemed to do that best.

***What's next for David Whish-Wilson?***

I'm currently working on two responses to a broader environmental problem: that of marine conservation in the context of global overfishing, marine piracy and contemporary maritime slavery in a world where fish is a major source of dietary protein. One response is intended to be a creative non-fiction text that explores these issues along with case studies that illustrate potential solutions, alongside reflections on philosophical ethology and fish behaviour, while the other response intends to be a novel that situates some of this research

in a narrative whose focus might be narrower in terms of character, place and plot, but which will also hopefully suggest the fuller scope of the broader issues. Amid this research and writing I will always be working on a crime novel, too, because crime fiction above all other genres ties together many of my interests and most of my fascinations.