

Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.3.1.139_5

Copyright © 2014.

This is the author’s version of the work, posted here with the permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted. You may also be able to access the published version from your library. The definitive version is available at http://online.sagepub.com/.
One of the joys of crime fiction is that it can use the device of investigation to not only solve the crime that drives its narrative, but also to explore the unstable faultlines that run beneath a society. Andrew Grimes’s The Richmond Conspiracy works this to good effect, examining the eruption of social and political anxieties of 1930s Melbourne while guiding us through a twisting tale of sexual intrigues and long harboured resentments that ends, naturally, in death.

James Maclaine is a returned service man maimed by shrapnel in battle who works as a Detective Inspector for the Victorian Police. We meet him and his equally battled scarred offsider at the scene of a murder in Richmond, Melbourne, in 1933. Someone has anonymously reported a body in a dusty warehouse that is revealed to be an influential but intensely unpopular veteran soldier and Vice Chairman of the Praetorian Guard. He has been eviscerated with a wartime souvenir, a bayonet from Gallipoli.

As the investigation moves from the industrial working class suburb of Richmond, its ‘speed course’ greyhound races, to the grand homes of Toorak and the Mt Macedon summer retreats of their owners, and through the outrage of the Jardine cricket scandal, we pace through a Melbourne struggling to cope with the residues of the First World War. Change, as Grimes has university lecturer Roger Palethorpe explain, is unsettling the nation, from the uncouth breaking of the rules by the English in the ‘Bodyline’ series, to the everyday relations between the classes. ‘Nothing is certain except that nothing is certain,’ Palethorpe remarks (214). Just as in this new postmodern era, there is no single discourse, to Maclaine’s dismay there seems to be no longer a single suspect for a murder nor a single cause. The secret lives and backroom trysts of men and women whose privilege, power and personal trauma make them feel they are beyond consequence means that grudges burn long and deep and that motives are plentiful.

This is crime fiction doing what it does best: capturing the dark undercurrent of a time and place in the vernacular of the era. Maclaine’s Melbourne is filled with damaged broken men, scarred of face and lung, families suddenly missing sons and husbands, and many soldiers unemployable ‘like so many men now [of a] violent past’ (99). With our foresight as twentieth first century readers, we feel the weight of time running out for the characters as they try to get a grip on the slippery illusion that we know is the between-war era, but that the characters feel is a wounded world trying to resettle. This sense of foreboding sets up ongoing tensions that mark the work as suitable for serialisation. We anticipate the traumas of books ahead with offsider Devlin’s dying mustard gas heavy lungs, Maclaine’s marriage slipping into elongated silences and slammed doors, and the misguided patriotism of listless young servicemen pushing them to join right wing organisations preparing for martial law. This may be the condition of the characters, but it also the condition of the world around them, and of nations facing similar struggles across the globe.

This mood is the novel’s strength, but the large cast of characters needed to create the sense of moral and social change proves difficult to manage. Connections between the Christie-like range of suspects with criss-crossing relationships and treacheries are kept close to the author’s chest until the final third of the book. As a result, the plot somewhat confusing at times, requiring the reader to keep a firm eye on who is who and the patterns of their alliance. The denouement has more spins, turns and flips than the two-up schools of the era, and while the murder’s identity resolves logically,
its articulation through the press to the public of the time communicates more confusion than clarity. Perhaps this was the point.

The Richmond Conspiracy can be read against Sulari Gentill’s Rowland Sinclair series, set in Sydney and featuring many of the same themes and social strains: trauma, political unrest and suspicion of the left in favour of the seemingly ordered control of the right, uneasy acceptance of more liberated sexual behaviours, and a listless population of young men. Gentill take us on a more joyful ride, while Grimes is more determined to let the heavy weight of this damaged era rest on our shoulders.