

Scrublands by Chris Hammer

Pub: Allen & Unwin Aus, 481pp

A year after a struggling country town has been shattered by the apparently pointless murder of five of its local citizens, a troubled journalist, Martin Scarsden arrives to write a story about the aftermath. He finds a town devastated by drought; citizens divided about what truly happened; and more crimes lurking in the scrubland outside *Riversend*.

As the stories unravel the city media flock to *Riversend* to add their special brand of chaos. Scarsden finds himself involved in more than writing a story and is forced to look at himself and his demons before he can resurrect himself from the cauldron that is reshaping him and the town.

Scrublands is a complex crime novel with a number of story lines and well-portrayed characters. It is filled with the present lives of the main characters as well as the backstory of the priest who shot five people; Scarsden's war trauma; and townspeople with hidden agendas. The policeman who had to investigate the crimes of his friend, Father Byron Swift; the local drunk and rapist of the mother of Mandalay, a bookshop owner, who Scarsden falls in love with; the adolescents in the town and the dwellers in the scrubland all of whom are hiding something.

At times the complexity is too much, but overall it has a well-paced arc. The narrative slows down, speeds up and wends back and forth, always in the stifling hot and oppressive township of *Riversend* and the nearby scrublands. The description of heat and dry are evocative, and depict the intensity and relentlessness of today's drought. The township and Scarsden, and in some ways, Mandalay, are reforging themselves in the pressure of the past crimes, their consequences and the heat that beats them and the town into a new shape.

Behind the stories of the pivotal characters – priest and journalist - is the theme of war and its effects. There is the statue of the WWI soldier who stands guard at the crossroads in the centre of town; the priest who has experienced war and brings it with him to a small town in southern New South Wales; and the journalist who is traumatised by it.

As in recent Australian crime novels by authors such as Garry Disher, Emma Viskic, Holly Brown, Allan Carter and Jane Harper, the setting is of paramount importance. *Riversend* is everytown in rural Australia. Failing to thrive, the young moving out and crime and drugs moving in, people desperate to give their lives meaning as they stagger in shock

from the drought and the actions of a few that affect the many. The feeling of desertion and heat is visceral.

No doubt the sense of place is enhanced by Chris Hammer's previous non-fiction book, *The River*. In this the author describes his journey through the same territory portrayed in the novel and it undoubtedly informed many of the characters.

There are a number of story lines and crimes that are interconnected. However, one of the main threads – why did the priest shoot five people? – was not convincing. Its explanation comes late in the novel, which is great for suspense, but I felt it went unsaid for too long and then it was piecemeal and anti-climactic. Father Swift is the only character who isn't fully realised, even though he has many complexities and plot positions. The author is trying to juggle just that little bit too much. Even though most of it works some of the plot points could easily have been left out and the book would have been 'cleaner'. However, it has great pace, interesting characters, fantastic sense of place and a convoluted but generally satisfying plot. I definitely recommend it.