

## The Lost Man

By Jane Harper

“From above, from a distance, the marks in the dust formed a tight circle. The circle was far from perfect ... It also wasn’t empty.” Thus begins Jane Harper’s latest novel *The Lost Man*. The circle in the dust is a mystery as is the old grave around which it rotates. It is also an image of hopelessness and tenacity and of how vastness can be narrowed to a pinpoint in time and space.

The story of the three Bright brothers – Cameron, the middle brother, whose body etches the circle into the dry outback dirt of Queensland; the oldest brother Nathan who is tortured by past mistakes and sets himself the task of solving his brother’s death; and the youngest, Harry, or Bub, who is more than he seems. The peripheral plots and characters appear just that until you are deeper into the story and realise they are all connected and all involved.

The prologue beautifully sets the scene and tone of *The Lost Man* – the feeling of expanse to nothingness in the outback of Queensland: desperation and mystery in both history and the present day. Two men have died by the stockman’s grave. There are many stories of how the first death took place in the 1800s and how the recent death of a local, well-loved cattleman, could possibly happen. As the novel unfolds secrets and mysteries about both deaths are resolved. The lives and characters of the Bright family are peeled back petal by torturous petal until all are exposed.

Even though you can see forever in the vast flat spaces, you can’t always see the people around you and their hidden inner worlds. Characters see the big picture in an effort to survive, but it is the little pictures that have the true impact – the precautions taken when moving about the landscape; the isolated families; the conservative townspeople; and most of all the secrets people keep, even from their nearest friends and family.

Jane Harper is a master of place and character. I loved her first book, *The Dry*, because of this. I didn't find her second novel, *Force of Nature*, as successful, because I felt she didn't portray the landscape as well and although the character of Detective Aaron Falk was continued it was without the detailed trajectory of *The Dry*. But *The Lost Man* is as good as her first with even more subtlety. There is nothing superfluous. The slow resolution of carefully crafted plot is complex, relentless and surprising. Jane Harper feeds you plausible red herrings, all of which add another layer to the story of the deaths and Cameron's family. I kept thinking I had it worked out, but I was wrong countless times.

Jane Harper's writing masterfully analyses and portrays complex issues such as love, family, rape and domestic violence.

A great crime novel. If you enjoy a focus on character and the Australian landscape you will love *The Lost Man*.

By Colleen O'Brien