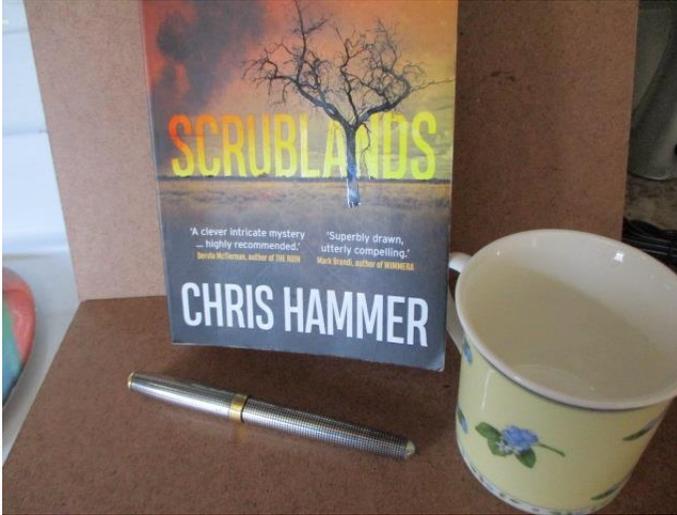


# Scrublands

By Rod Fraser



Just before Christmas, my brother (who lives in Australia) was good enough to send me a book for holiday reading ... a mystery story. It amounted to some 485 pages: normally too long for my tastes. But the typeface looked friendly and the dustjacket promising. I started reading later the next day.

This is the best book I have read in a long, long time. It has a complex, interesting plot, tells a intriguing story of a small town in the Australian outback and is a page turner to boot. Who could ask for more?

In the first few pages, we quickly learn that one year earlier, for no apparent reason, the Anglican priest in Riversend, Byron Swift, shot five people dead on a Sunday morning, just prior to church services.

In turn, a few minutes later, the local police constable, Robbie Haus-Jones, confronted Swift on the steps of the church and asked him to drop his weapon. When the priest raised his rifle to his shoulder, and pointed it at Haus-Jones, the constable shot him dead in the chest with two bullets. Robbie Haus-Jones and Bryon Swift were best friends.



The above paragraphs are a short introduction to the novel, which begins almost a year later—on a hot, dusty day, when Martin Scarsden drives into Riversend, sent by his editor to tell the story of the shooting and its impact on the town.

His first stop is the local café and bookstore, where he meets the owner, a young women by the name of Mandy Blonde. When she learns the purpose of his trip, she tells Martin the accepted explanation for the shooting is wrong. Bryon Swift was not a pedophile and killer.

*"I don't believe it. Not every priest is a*

*pedophile.... There was something holy about him, like a saint or something."*



So starts this intriguing story with multiple sub-plots, twists and turns, and colorful characters to charm you. I finished the book far too quickly. I couldn't put it down.

To my mind, the best mystery stories offer their readers something more than a clever 'whodunit': Perhaps insightful thoughts on the people or places that provide a backdrop to the story, or thoughtful observations on the human condition. In *Scrubland*, both are offered up and done so well.

We learn of life in the Australian outback, where heat frequently rises to 40 degrees Celsius. Summers are brutal and unrelenting, and drought is a recurring reality. Not to mention that many of the small towns in the rural areas are disappearing.

The author's affection for his characters and the outback is infectious. Although I'm not eager to take on 40 degree Celsius weather (I prefer Canada's moderate summers), I loved Riversend, its people, its troubled past and the acceptance of Martin Scarsden into their community.

You might be interested to read a small excerpt from a sub-plot of the book which talks about a bush

fire, where the locals (and a recently recruited Martin Scarsden) fight to save their town. Martin is soon kitted out by Robbie Haus-Jones with orange overalls, heavy boots, hard hat, leather gloves and goggles.

*"Know anything about bush fires, Martin?"*

*"I told you. Nothing."*

*"No worries, there's not much to know.... You know what kills people in bush fires [Martin]?"*

*"Smoke inhalation?"*

*"Nup. That's house fires. City fires. In bush fires, it's heat, pure and simple. The fire front will generate temperatures of hundreds of degrees. If it catches you in the open, it'll cook you alive.... We attack from the flanks, not from the front."*

The fire is brought under control after a couple of days, and in the aftermath, Martin continues his research of the earlier shooting, learns about other criminal activity in the town and writes about what he finds. Two young girls have been murdered, raped and their bodies dumped in a local mill pond.

These murders bring on a full-blown police investigation from Sydney and the involvement of the Australian Intelligence Service. It is soon discovered 'The Reapers Motorcycle Club' is involved with drugs in the community. They are suspected of

the recent murder of a police detective, as well as a local innkeeper in town (the latter some months back).

There is plenty to sort out in Riversend and it is clear Martin is up to the job. In the end, his sleuthing and journalism skills enable him to explain all, and write a 6,000 word story about it for a national magazine. A book is expected to follow. There are hints Mandy Blonde and Martin Scarsden are destined for romantic involvement. But you'll have to read the book to be sure.



The author of *Scrubland*, Chris Hammer, was a journalist in Australia for more than 30 years. This novel follows his non-fiction book, *The River*, which was written in 2010. Chris has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in international relations. He lives in Canberra.

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