

BOOK LAUNCH:
DARK CLOUDS ON THE MOUNTAIN BY JOHN TULLY

1. INTRO

First, I would like to thank you, John, and your publisher, for inviting me to launch the book. I know we have been colleagues for many years, even many many years ago comrades in the anti-Vietnam War movement, but I am very aware that I don't have a literary background. Politics and peace studies are my fields rather than literature, so I am not the natural choice for launching a novel, and I may have to be forgiven for the occasional literary faux pas. I was very pleased to be invited because I enjoyed reading your first novel, *Death is the Cool Night*, and now here is your second, certainly not a sequel since it is a very different genre, but with some overlapping preoccupations.

2. THE STORY

Dark Clouds on the Mountain is in form of a detective crime story, set largely in Hobart two decades ago, but with some detours in both place and time. These include other parts of Tasmania, especially Queenstown, flashbacks to Tasmania in the immediate postwar years, and events in the Ukraine and central Europe during the period of fascist rule before and during the Second World War.

The main protagonist is the very memorable Inspector Jack Martin, in his late fifties, son of an Aussie mother and an Italian immigrant father, faced with juggling his time between a job that is constantly taking him away from his family and a series of escalating crimes involving racism, prejudice, criminal neo-Nazi elements, and attacks on environmental activists.

Jack is memorable because he is not your stereotyped hard bitten semi-literate cop but someone who manages to combine toughness and determination with an interest in history and literature. He is continually haunted by his past, and has a

very engaging Australian sense of humour and way of talking. Jack is certainly an original creation. I can't think of any other fictional detective, either in books or on TV, that comes close to him, though the English Inspectors Morse and Foyle might find something in common in talking good books and fine music with him. On the other hand, they might be put off by his chain smoking and very hands on approach to arresting suspects. Jack Martin also has a nose for good leads that rivals a famous Austrian inspector, Inspector Rex, but, unlike Rex, his bark is definitely worse than his bite.

I know it is absolutely *de rigueur* not to spoil a good crime story by revealing the detail of what happens next and to whom, so I am not going to further into the story line. But what I do want to say is that, while the whole book is in the genre of a crime thriller, and works brilliantly at that level, keeping you gripped and wanting to know what happens next at every point (once started I could not put it down), it is so much more than just another entertaining detective story.

3. WHAT THE BOOK IS ALSO ABOUT

I happened to come to this book just after finishing Stieg Larsson's Millennium crime fiction trilogy about the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. All three parts of Larsson's trilogy were absolutely engrossing, not only for the originality of the characters and the tension of the unfolding action, but for doing something that most thrillers fail to do, that is, helping us better understand the world we live in and negotiating our way through that world. In Larsson's trilogy, we are not only led through a labyrinthine network of interconnected violence, crimes and machinations, but shown the workings of both mainstream and critical media, the underbelly of conservatism, anti-democratic elites, and violence against women, in what is usually perceived as one of the most progressive, democratic and liberal of countries, Sweden. At the same time, Larsson gives us an extraordinarily concrete picture of life in contemporary Sweden, a sense of a particular place at a particular time.

In the same way, John's book does much more than simply entertain. It is as much about place and history and memory and a certain stage of life as it is about crime and police and "getting results" (as they might put it in *The Bill*). It is also about some deeper political threats posed by contemporary racist and neofascist groups.

4. PLACE AND HISTORY

To begin with, John's book gives us an amazingly detailed sense of place and history: not only for Hobart and Queenstown but for Tasmania more broadly. I have a little experience of Tassie myself, having bushwalked around through the Southwest Wilderness region twice, and passed through all the places mentioned in the novel. As a visitor from the "North Island", I have obviously not had much chance to get below the surface, but after reading this novel, if I pass through these places again, I will be looking at them with very new eyes, especially Queenstown. Bushwalking in the Tasmania wilderness gave me the impression that Tasmania was one of the most beautiful places on earth. But it's an extraordinary irony that some of the most beautiful places on earth are also witness to some of the darkest events, as we are seeing in Afghanistan and West Papua right now. Tasmania both in the past and continuing up to the present has its share of dark events, beginning with the massacre of its indigenous people, the history of violence at Port Arthur, and the destruction of the natural environment. This novel, like Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, captures both the light and dark of the place and history that is Tasmania.

Often this is in one and the same passage, as in these lines in the Prologue: "...the dark island. Dark because of the forests, dark for the great black rains that would come howling in from Storm Bay, dark for the waters full of peat from the button grass moors and desolate mountains, darker still from the history of the island. Tasmania had begun as a place without pity or hope...Along the way, the Aboriginal inhabitants were almost completely exterminated; regarded as pests like the Tasmanian tiger, the thylacine that once roamed the forests."

Or again, in another passage, as we look at present day Queenstown through Jack's eyes: "It was only mid-morning when Jack drove through Linda and Gormanston, past the burned-out shell of the old pub and the graveyard...Here and there, a tree struggled tenaciously, grasping for life in this flayed landscape, but overall it was as if the world were one enormous tailings dump and quarry. A century or so earlier, there had been no greenies to protest at the felling of the forests that had cloaked the mountains...Now the very bones of the land were exposed; bare mountainsides rotting in the rain and the rare interludes of sunshine, the creeks choked grey with silt from the violated soil."

Throughout the book, there are wonderfully precise and evocative descriptions of the buildings, streets and landscapes that are Hobart and other parts of Tasmania, and always infused with a sense of the history and place that only someone who knows and loves these places intimately can bring us.

5. MEMORY AND LIFE STAGE

But this is also a book about memory and life stage, particularly in the form of the memories and the life stage of the main protagonist, Jack Martin. There are women of a certain age, and there are men of a certain age. Jack is a man of certain age, and I can very much empathise with him since I am the same certain age, with all the usual problems of males at this age, bodily deterioration, self-doubts, conflicts with offspring whom fathers won't allow to learn from their own experience (even though that's the way they learned themselves), conflicts with partners and families over life-work balance, and the memories, so many memories, that variously haunt or console you as the years accumulate: good memories, painful memories, the paths taken and the paths not taken, the loves you have and the loves that fate did not allow, irrevocable changes in physical or social landscapes that meant so much to you in earlier years; all that Proust called the remembrance of things past. In John's book, memory actually becomes a central part of the whole unfolding sequence of events, involving not only

Jack's own memories of his father but also the memories of others in what are relatively small and close-knit communities.

One of the things I liked and appreciated throughout this book is the way in which Jack's preoccupations and memories were never far from the surface, and expressed with the mix of anxiety, humour, regret and self-deprecation that is so much part of his character.

Here, for example, is the part where Jack starts his police investigation of a brutal assault on greenies at a protest camp in a logging area close to Queenstown:

"I suppose you've come to evict us", said one of the young women.

"Well, actually no, " Jack said dropping to a squat that hurt his calf muscles when nobody offered him a chair. "We're here about the assaults." ...

"Yeah...First thing we knew was that some maniacs ran in and started laying into people. Even bashing us through the walls of our tents." Her voice caught and she trailed off. One of the others hugged her and Jack saw that she was crying. A few other Feral had drifted in from the surrounding bush and stood like sheep with their backs to the drizzle, their eyes soft and vaguely hopeful."

"Look," he said gently, wanting to tell this vulnerable young woman that he had a daughter just like her – who could have been her, in fact – that he really did care, but he guessed they'd seen too many hard-faced coppers to believe him. "My number one concern is to catch whoever did this to you and bring them to justice". His words sounded hollow even to himself.

This particular part of the book particularly resonated with me, since my own daughters, Imogen and Miriam, did exactly the same thing – only the camp they went to was in East Gippsland, not Tasmania.

Throughout the book, till its final denouement, I liked the way in which Jack's voice never became too self-righteous – but served to convey his basic decency and efforts to understand what is driving and motivating others, even those bent on racist or criminal violence.

6. NEW POLITICAL THREATS

Like Larsson's exposure of the darker sides to Swedish politics and society, John Tully has not shrunk from exposing similar sides to Tasmanian politics and practices.

Even from the passages already cited, you could not read the book without coming away with some understanding of the violence done to both the first peoples and the natural environment of this, one of the most beautiful places on earth.

But not only this, the book also seeks to explore the ways in which angry and alienated people who are marginalized by the economy or affected by drugs can so easily be coopted into violent neo-fascist or neo-conservative movements even in a relevantly strong democracy such as Australia. This, of course, was how the Italian and German fascists first came to power, and there is ample evidence from the resurgence of rightwing racist and anti-immigration groups around the world that this continues to be a very real threat.

7. CONCLUSION

So, John, allow me to congratulate you on what is a great accomplishment: a book that is so exciting and readable that most people who start it won't be able to put it down. A book that has such an original and memorable character as Jack Martin...that evokes Hobart and other Tasmania places with such detail and atmosphere... and that contains so much to make you think and reflect, not least the final and most fitting quote from Carlo Levi... which I will leave for your readers to discover for themselves.

Michael Hamel-Green

11/11/10