

# BOOK CLUB NOTES

## Prime Cut

Alan Carter

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### About the Book

The world is in economic meltdown but the mining town of Hopetoun, Western Australia, is booming. With the town's population exploding, it's easy enough to hide a crime — and a dirty past.

DSC Cato Kwong is a disgraced cop and ex-poster boy for the police force, banished to investigating roadkill with the Stock Squad after the fallout from a police frame-up. Cato is given a second chance when a torso washes up on the wild shores of the Great Southern Ocean and his old boss DI Mick Hutchens is desperate — and short-staffed.

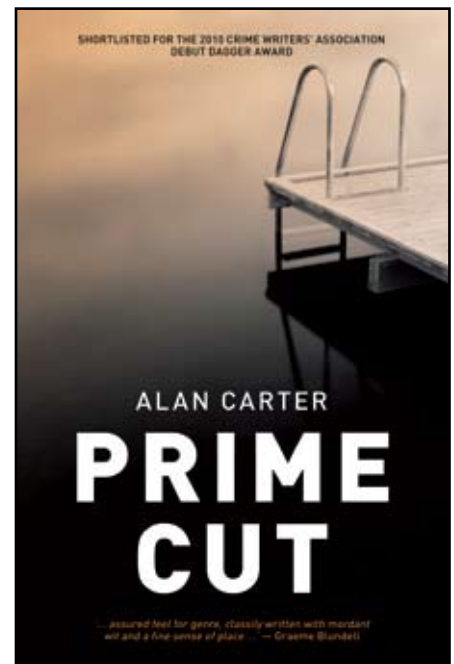
All Hutchens wants from Kwong is a quick-and-easy shark-attack verdict. But when Cato discovers that the body's head was cut off before it hit the water, he decides to take a closer look.

Cato faces powerful opposition in the town when his investigation lifts the lid on the exploitation of migrant workers. He learns that in big business, as in the police force, keeping quiet is easier — and safer. But will he be able to turn a blind eye for the second time in his career?

Meanwhile, bad coffee and bad romance leave a bitter taste in Cato's mouth. Why is the DI's luscious protégé Lara Sumich kissing him? And is Justin Woodward — the only decent coffeemaker in Hopetoun — selling more than excellent flat whites from his mobile van?

The stakes are raised higher when the Chinese whispers started by Cato in an attempt to flush out information disturb an even darker criminal mind.

*Prime Cut* is more than a gripping crime story. Through fictional events played out in a real Western Australian mining town, Carter explores the underbelly of life in a boom time. The troubled race relations represented in the book reveal some of the issues faced by Australian society today. The side-stories cleverly woven by Carter — vulnerable fourteen-year-old girls in the company of pretty-faced drug-pushers, or a dysfunctional family that breeds a violent, disaffected teenager — are ones the reader will find confronting, but recognisable. Perhaps the greatest of these is the often-returned-to theme of the price



members of the police force pay in their daily encounters with social dysfunction and disaffection — and the difficulty of retaining one’s integrity in a society that lacks exactly that.

*Prime Cut* is Alan Carter’s debut novel. The manuscript (then titled ‘Chinese Whispers’) was shortlisted in 2010 for the prestigious international Crime Writers’ Association Debut Dagger Award. It has been praised by award-winning crime novelist Allan Guthrie as ‘ambitious and multi-layered’. *Bookseller+Publisher* highlighted the ‘many layers to this story, genuine “aha” moments and a very strong cast of main and supporting characters.’ It is through these characters, and their place in a world Carter paints so vividly, that we can reflect upon our own.

## About the Author

Alan Carter was born in Sunderland, UK, in 1959. He holds a degree in Communications Studies from Sunderland Polytechnic and immigrated to Australia in 1991. Alan lives in Fremantle with his wife Kath and son Liam. He works as a television documentary director. *Prime Cut* is Alan Carter’s first novel. He wrote it while he was living in Hopetoun as a kept man.

## Discussion Questions

1. Aspects of dysfunction are common to many of the families in the book: Tess’s relationship with her daughter is fraught, the Stevenson family is out of control, and Cato is alienated from his wife and son. In what ways do each of these family dynamics change from the book’s beginning to its end? In particular, what is the change that Cato experiences in relation to his son? Why has Carter chosen to include this?
2. In what way does the character of Cato Kwong align with, or diverge from, detectives in other crime thrillers you have read?
3. Considering the representations of family and parenthood in the book, what is the symbolic significance of the murders committed by Davey Arthurs, who methodically kills wives and children?
4. The investigation of the washed-up torso in Hopetoun eventually leads to the discovery of migrant workers living in sub-humane conditions, exploited by the mining contractors that employ them. Why do you think SaS employed them? What do you think are the circumstances that made the Chinese workers agree to continue working in these conditions? Can you think of other reasons why migrant workers do not or cannot leave their work despite violations of their human rights?
5. In conversation with Cato, Travis Grant refers to ‘some Chinks’, while Keith Stevenson scornfully calls Cato ‘Jackie Chan’. Do you consider these to be expressions of racism? Why or why not? What are some of the other aspects of racism — large or small — explored in the novel?

6. Why does Constable Greg Fisher identify with the young recruit Cato Kwong? What are the parallels in their day-to-day experiences, despite differences in their cultural heritage?
7. Tess's fourteen-year-old daughter Melissa says, 'I thought I was meant to be the reckless out of control one' (p. 188). What do you think are the causes of Tess's reclusion, suicidal thoughts and alcohol abuse?
8. What is the trajectory of Tess's 'healing'? Is Tess 'okay' by the end of the book? Why has Carter chosen to include a character like Tess in this novel? What is the point of including a past connection between Cato and Tess?
9. Police officers, by the nature of their job, can be exposed to more stress and trauma than the average person, with some officers experiencing lingering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Do you think police officers have a tough job? Why, or why not? What personality traits do you think would make a good police officer? Do you or anyone you know work as a police officer, and if so, what are some of the experiences of the job?
10. The character of Stuart Miller is from a different generation of policing altogether. What light does the inclusion of his character shed on the current generation of officers in this novel? What do we learn about the way trauma has shaped Miller's life in the aftermath of the crime by Davey Arthurs?
11. The majority of the characters in this book are flawed in some way, committing acts of violence or corruption. Of the characters listed below, who do you think the book ultimately portrays favourably? In what ways?
  - Cato Kwong
  - Tess Maguire
  - Johnno Djukic
  - Mick Hutchens
  - Jim Buckley
  - Guan Yu
  - David Tahere ('Man-Mountain')
  - Justin Woodward
  - Kane Stevenson
  - Jai Stevenson
  - Keith Stevenson
  - Travis Grant
  - Davey Arthurs
12. What is it that redeems some characters and makes it easier for the reader to forgive them? Are there any characters on whose virtue the reader remains undecided?
13. What is the value in the author drawing such a wide moral 'grey area'?

## Interview with Alan Carter

### **Have you been a long-time crime reader?**

If you count reading *The Famous Five* when I was about eight or nine then yes; but I've been reading the grittier stuff for about the last fifteen years or so — Ian Rankin's Rebus series was the backbone of it, before moving on to James Ellroy, Graham Hurley, James Lee Burke and latterly some more exotic or historical ones like Qiu Xiaolong's Inspector Chen series and Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther series.

### **How long have you been writing?**

I write as part of my TV documentary work: narration, story proposals, synopses etcetera. So I've been doing that for about twenty-five years. Fiction is a very recent departure and *Prime Cut*, which I started in 2008, is my first outing.

### **Was there a moment that prompted this particular story? How did the idea germinate?**

The moment my wife said she was prepared to let me be a kept man for a year while I wrote this so-called book I reckoned was in me — that was a turning point. But there were several stimulants: reading about a cold case in a newspaper, recalling situations I'd witnessed while working on TV cop reality shows, hearing shark tales from Hopetoun locals, reading about exploited migrant workers on 457 visas, and looking every day at the landscape around Hopetoun.

### ***Prime Cut* is acutely observant of social problems such as family dysfunction, exploitation of migrant workers, Indigenous people's history, and police corruption.**

### **What role do you think stories and literature play in addressing such issues?**

Kim Scott's *Benang* is a classic example of how the history of Indigenous people, particularly from that south coast area, can be vividly and very movingly brought to life. Crime fiction is a useful genre for talking about these things too — any crime story or series I've enjoyed in the past has been firmly rooted in the pervasive social issues of the time — as indeed are many real-life crimes. For example, Graham Hurley's Joe Faraday series portrays a bleak and cynical United Kingdom under New Labour. Martin Cruz Smith's Renko series charts the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of the new Russian oligarchs. Through these protagonists and the crimes they investigate we get an insight into those societies at that time in their history.

### **How did you balance the real place of Hopetoun with a fictional storyline?**

Very carefully — I might want to go back and live there again someday. The descriptions of place are as real as I remember them. The characters are complete figments of my imagination (especially the bad guys) — any resemblances to people living or dead are purely coincidental etcetera etcetera.

### **Cato Kwong is a complex character who seems fully realised from the very beginning of the book; what were the main ingredients in creating Cato?**

He's kind of me but a few centimetres taller, a few kilos lighter, and a good few years younger. Oh and Chinese. And I don't play the piano. But the crosswords bit is me.

**Several aspects of racism are raised in *Prime Cut*, which are in contrast to the 'multicultural' line officially promoted (for instance in Cato's poster-boy past). How serious do you think this disconnection is in our society?**

Not being a victim of racism myself I can't really comment on the degree of that disconnection between image and reality. But in general terms you don't have to look far (the daily news and comment blogs, for example) to see constant reminders that not everybody shares the Advance Australia Fair thing — particularly the second verse about 'those that come across the sea'.

**What did your research for police work involve?**

Recalling my scary middle-of-the-night outings in cop show reality-TV-land; reading lots of Graham Hurley (his attention to police procedural detail is outstanding); and watching and reading a lot of news.

**Does your work as a television documentary director influence your writing style, or do you keep them in separate spheres?**

I try to keep them separate but I have been chastised in both quarters for my occasional resort to cliché (however tongue-in-cheek I might claim to be). The doco work has taught me clarity, terseness, brevity, pacing, and tension along with sprinklings of humour, so in that regard there are parallels. But crime writing for me offers a way back to the occasional bursts of lyricism and subtlety which are a rare commodity on telly these days.

**Where to next for Detective Senior Constable Kwong?**

He's back in the big smoke under the care and guidance of his old boss DI Mick Hutchens, and engaged in a deadly game of cat and mouse with the luscious but lethal Lara Sumich. Watch this space.