

BURN PATTERNS

RON ELLIOTT

ABOUT THE BOOK

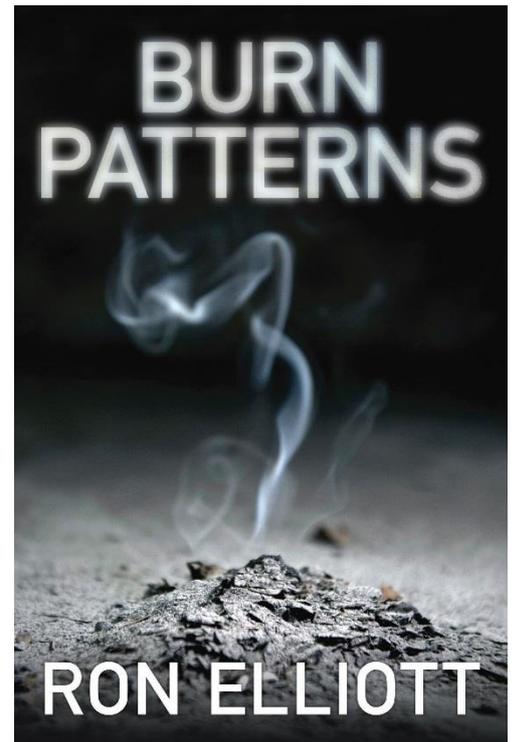
Burn Patterns is a smokin' new crime novel from Ron Elliott. Iris Foster, once known as the Fire Lady, is working for a psychology practice as a narrative therapist, trying to put her own life together after a devastating office fire. But when an arson attack occurs at a local high school, the Fire Lady is pulled in to profile the suspect. Soon she finds herself a reluctant participant in an investigation, looking for patterns in the ashes and for the identity of the arsonist Zorro who 'signs' each fire with the letter Z. As the body count mounts and the public attacks become more orchestrated and brazen, Iris the Fire Lady finds that she has become a suspect too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Elliott is a scriptwriter, film and television director and academic. He is the author of the novel *Spinner* and the fiction collection *Now Showing*, as well as 'The Lake Story', which was a finalist in the Carmel Bird Award for long short stories. Ron lives in Perth, Western Australia.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does Iris Foster fail to conform to the classic 'detective' role in this crime novel?
2. In what ways are some of the characters of the suspects equally unexpected? Why do you think the author has chosen to divert from conventional crime in this way?
3. What aspects of the crime genre are still firmly in play?
4. How would you describe Iris Foster as a person – as a therapist, a mother, a wife? What do we learn of her life as the novel progresses? How has her childhood helped shape the kind of person she is today?
5. Does Iris choose her vocation as the Fire Lady, or is a job like that an inevitable destination for someone like her?
6. Which therapist from the Park Psychology and Healing Centre would you choose as your therapist, and why?
7. The clinical psychologist Gillian seeks assistance from Iris when she feels she is being an ineffectual participant in the healing process. How does the character of Gillian contribute to what the author says about the role of people in helping others?
8. How does the role of Iris herself contribute to this picture?
9. From the point of view both of characterisation and plot development, why do you think that Ron Elliott has chosen the (temporary) career of narrative therapy for Iris?
10. What role does storytelling play in *Burn Patterns*? What do you think the author is telling us about the importance of the stories we choose to tell about ourselves? What limitations might telling such stories have in relation to our development or healing? What circumstances in a story might be beyond each 'author's' control? What role might others have in helping us shape or explore these narratives?
11. In what kind of shape is the marriage of Iris and Mathew? What do we learn of their partnership as the novel progresses? Do you think that they are going to stay together forever?
12. What can the aftermath of a fire tell us about the person who lit it? What kind of people are James and Zorro, who both occupy a position in the fire-lighting spectrum?



13. How is post-traumatic stress depicted in *Burn Patterns*? What do we learn about its impact on the lives of its sufferers?
14. What kind of a sidekick for Iris is Charles Koch, and how are we supposed to feel about him?
15. What kind of a detective is Stuart Pavlovic? Why does he harbour so many suspicions about Iris?
16. This crime novel is written in a style that is sometimes tongue-in-cheek – but about some themes the author is very serious. Which themes are these? How does he use the crime genre to explore them?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Based on your published works and screenplays so far, you seem to be a storyteller of infinite variety! Where did the character of Iris come from? And what drew you to writing about arson, and post-traumatic stress disorder in the people who fight fires?

Wow, let's start with an easy question!

Let me break my answer down into parts and start in the middle. I have always been fascinated by fire. When I was a boy I played with fire and could easily have burned down the house and the school when my fire playing got away from me. I got over this childhood play as most people do, by the way. But fire is such a central thing to humans, both warming, cooking and yet dangerous. In Perth, the possibility of bush fires is real. And awful.

In the last parts of 'Random Malice' (in *Now Showing*) a psychopath who has been targeting a suburban family sets fire to their house, trapping them inside. I started playing with the idea of an arsonist who might use fire to hurt, as an evil weapon. I had been thinking about another character who thought he was from Mars, but was suffering from delusions, who used fire compulsively. And by examining the possible motives for lighting fires, I started to structure my thriller, dragging both those characters together.

And instead of only using a detective pursuing the firefighting crime, I also brought in a fire investigator who would be examining the aftermath of fires. So far, so straightforward perhaps for an arson investigation. However, I decided I also need a psychiatrist to examine the psychology of firefighting. So now I had three investigative streams possibly circling the same criminal.

It was while exploring Iris's background as forensic psychologist that post-traumatic stress kept bobbing up, at first with serving police and firefighters but also within a range of people who need counselling. Then it felt right that Iris might be suffering from PTSD herself, that she might be battling this while trying to help others while being dragged into the investigation. Suddenly I had ignition and a lot of fuel and Iris kind of raced away with all the things that happened. She took over. She's a really complex character who would often surprise me with the ways she did things and the things she said.

How much research did you need to do into the properties of fire, and fire damage?

I had to do a lot of research for this novel. The firefighting, fire investigation and technical issues were probably the easiest in terms of the manuals and online data including training videos and fictional works, both in film and books, that is available. I was also lucky enough to be able to run the manuscript past a real fire fighter and investigator.

The psychological aspects took more, of course, in terms of examining both the more psychologically driven, rather than profit-driven motives and behaviours of firefighters. These led me to specific things I needed to have happen, like the basis of profiling criminals and the use of the inkblot tests for instance.

I read a couple of very important works on post-traumatic stress and also some works around soldiers' suffering, but that also led to the prevalence of other stress sufferers, like ambulance drivers for instance. It also led to explorations of rape victims and how they can suffer in exactly the same way as soldiers. And that example became part of Iris's counselling. *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman was just one very important work I studied.

Another very large part of the research was into narrative therapy. It is something I had stumbled on and I felt it was a compelling metaphor for other things about writing and life. Of course, the real therapy sessions are much more painstaking and go on for longer than I can use in a fictional work, which needs to drive along quite quickly, but there were a variety of crossovers between damaged people including those serving the community. (I think it is in this therapeutic area that I was able to draw in some of the PTSD threads into the themes I talk about next.)

Some of the themes in this novel are rather dark – in particular the psychological damage that may be visited upon young children, and its repercussions later in life. Again, I wonder what drew you to write about these things, and why crime seemed a useful vehicle to do it.

Yes. This does inform the novel. There are dichotomies for instance. Forensic psychology finds baddies; clinical psychology seeks to heal. Damage can mean victim, but those, as we all know, can become tomorrow's hurters. Robert I. Simon's *Bad Men Do What Good Men Dream* informed some parts of this, especially his case studies. Many interviewed serial killers had been bedwetters, firefighters and animal harmers when young. And many have been damaged as children by physical and psychological harm. They repeat. There is a link between multiple personality disorder and child abuse.

Burn Patterns allows for the exploration of Mad or Bad. But I'm also interested in why people behave well. I think I started thinking about the varieties of injury that can affect all of us, set down certain personality strengths, weakness and chosen pathways. There is a fire investigation but there's also an exploration of psychology in this psychological thriller. In this respect, perhaps *Burn Patterns* is a series of character studies concerning how people deal with damage and whether they heal or perpetuate. Fire becomes a metaphor for that.

Many of your characters seem to exist somewhere on the coping scale, from 'barely' to 'reasonably well'. What draws you to characters whose lives are a little bit damaged?

I think they are interesting. I don't think anyone is perfect. All the world's a little mad except thee and me, and even you are a little strange. Ha. My father suffered from schizophrenia so perhaps that has made me look at things without assuming too much. But yes, you're right. I do have a fair few, don't I?

Michael, the uncle in my cricket novel *Spinner*, was suffering from shell shock, which made him both fragile and extremely unreliable, and this meant that even though young Donald had some amazing gifts, he was always very close to peril. Ellis, the lowlife thug in 'The Ring-in', seems to be coping really well by all standards except moral and legal. He doesn't even question his own evil until the very end of that noir tale.

And Iris too is battling to get over things in her own past, her own family as well as recent events. It makes for a complex central character I think, one that we must watch a little more closely, without unmitigated trust, perhaps. But I also think they cause us to reflect. These extreme characters can test other characters and the reader. As mentioned above, a nasty man targets a family in 'Random Malice', but the interest for me is in the father, the mother and the two kids. How do they deal with the seemingly random bad luck that turns into terrifying danger?

I suspect most of us are mostly in the coping 'reasonably well' category until something comes along to mess that up. I think fiction can provide windows to these tectonic plates.

Burn Patterns is told completely from one character's viewpoint. Why?

I didn't really intend to. My first rough plan was to tell a more traditional thriller, say a bit like *Red Dragon*. I'd go with the fire investigator, then the psychologist, then the detective, the killer preparing. There seem great advantages for pacing, for ease of choosing where next, for manipulating tension and stakes. But then I had this counter-idea of telling it completely through Iris. It is how she comes to the case, how she meets the other characters, what people want from her and her from them. This had some problems of plotting initially, but it

caused me to go quite deeply into her character and her past as she discovered things about the potential serial killer. And it led to some interesting ways of coming at the investigation too. She was mostly concerned with her bit and not with a variety of overviews. It caused surprises too. I let her lead and was not expecting the gymnasium to blow up on page 16, which sends all kinds of things going in a different way. I must say I kept agonising over my decision. This is never going to work. Why am I writing a thriller with both hands tied behind my back? And yet, in answering some of these technical plotting questions about the story, I think it makes for less predictable reading. The story is as much about Iris as about solving the crime.

What's next for Ron Elliott?

I'm currently working on another novel about a rock star who is poisoned. I'm not sure if it is a crime novel. There is lots of crime in it, but also some music making. I have no idea how I'm going to make it work and every second day, I agonise about the whole enterprise.

I hope then to get to a project I have been thinking about for a long time. It's about an American who solves some crimes in WA in the 1890s while he tries to find the woman who broke his heart. He's completely sane but not always sober.



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