

**Brendan Ritchie** is a writer and filmmaker from Fremantle, Western Australia. In 2015 he published his Inky Award nominated debut novel, *Carousel*, and was awarded a PhD in Creative Writing. In addition to writing, Brendan spends his time lecturing across a range of creative disciplines. Find out more at [www.brendanritchie.com](http://www.brendanritchie.com).

**Praise for *Carousel***

‘This is a lively and imaginative novel about consumerism, youth, art, isolation, entrapment and survival, the sort of thing that might happen if Kafka wrote a script for *Big Brother*.’ – *Sydney Morning Herald*

**BEYOND  
CAROUSEL**  
**BRENDAN RITCHIE**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

# 1

We've been holed up in a mansion in the hills for more than a month now.

Too scared to go back down into the suburbs. Too embarrassed to run further eastward. We spend our days bobbing about in the pool and eating mandarins from the orchard, and our nights on the balconies keeping Chess from barking while the four of us watch the strange and epic lightshows in the distant city.

The house isn't powered like Carousel. Pretty much nowhere is. But it has a line of solar panels on the roof and two summers worth of power stored in the batteries. Enough for showers, air conditioning, pool filters – anything we want. Except for lights. Never any lights.

At night we shuffle the long hallways with tiny reading lights tucked into our belts and pockets, our voices hushed and careful against the manic drone of insects outside.

Lights are an unwelcome beacon in a city full of shadow. We had been drawn to them ourselves. At night

in the suburbs. Lost and lonely and desperately craving answers.

The first place was a high school. A broken pathway of fluoros led us to a wing of buildings housing workshops for art, jewellery and woodwork. Inside it was deserted and ramshackle. Furniture shifted around, rubbish on the floor. The adjoining cafeteria smashed open and decimated. Somebody had been sleeping and working in the art room by a cluster of spidery easels. All around were piles of striking yet discarded abstracts. We called out, searched the grounds, stayed there for the night and most of the next day. But nobody came.

Then there was the Chinese restaurant. Its red and yellow glow breaking through the darkness as we trudged northward to the airport. The dining area was clean. Just one table used out of the thirty or so on offer. On it were some pens, a pot of mouldy green tea and a waning stack of waiter docketts. Again, the kitchen had been emptied. All that remained were two giant sacks of rice, one labelled Nov–Dec, the other Jan–Feb. No mention of a year.

At a mini-mart we ran into the dogs. Pit bulls bred in the suburbs by pot dealers and revheads. Feral now, if they weren't before. Hammering along in silent, terrifying packs. Drawn to light and smell and anything that moved. Lizzy locked eyes with two of them at the front of the store. Not knowing any better, she was just about to kneel down and call them over when a third

one came bombing out of the shadows, straight for her. She flinched and it knocked her sideways before thundering into the wall. Luckily it was dazed and Taylor and I could pull her inside before the other two arrived.

For two days we bunkered in the store while the Bulls, as Taylor called them, paced around outside. They didn't really bark, which made them creepy as hell. If you listened closely you could hear them grunt and wheeze as they ran. Otherwise it was just the scrape of their claws on concrete or the sudden smack and gurgle of dog on dog as a fight broke out and the hierarchy shifted.

Perth's missing bogans had a lot to answer for.

Eventually we left and kept moving towards the airport. It had been early morning when the Disappearance happened. It seemed like most of Perth had still been in their homes. Asleep or shuffling through bedrooms and kitchens in weekday morning stupor. We found flooded bathrooms, clothes laid out on beds, garage doors halfway open, coffee turned from black to white, then evaporated into grey sludge.

A scattering of shiftworkers and early risers had been caught outside. Their legacy was dappled across the city. From cars strewn wildly across highways and suburban streets – some gently awaiting traffic signals, others crunched into lampposts and bus stops – to sunrise bootcamp sessions where medicine balls lay suspended in shrine-like circles at parks and ovals. A rank of

late-night taxis covered in bird shit like rocks blipping from a giant concrete ocean. A tradie's ute still waiting to order at a McDonald's drive-through. Kickboards drifting the sagging lanes of an outdoor pool.

It was Pompeii 2.0, sans the plaster casts.

The eastern suburbs were browned over and ticking hot with the first months of summer. We had tried to push-start a couple of cars but the batteries were too far gone and the petrol spoiled. A Corolla almost turned over with Lizzy behind the wheel. Taylor and I screamed in excitement as she rolled away from us, only to stall, hop forward, then crash into the neighbour's fence. We felt guilty and rode bikes after that.

Eventually we hit scrubland and what I hoped was the edge of the airport buffer zone. It may well have been, but the bush was swarming with the Bulls. Initially we thought we might be able to go around them. They seemed distracted, fighting over something. One of them stopped to look at us. Then another. When the third Bull turned we saw what it was on the ground beneath them. The shreds of denim. The dirty All Stars. The fleck of white and deep red.

They chased us relentlessly and would have caught us if not for the highway. It was wide and smooth and not covered in crap like the smaller roads. We geared up and it took us eastward. Eventually the Bulls dropped away. Their hulking frames turned to dots on the horizon. When the highway began an incline and trees started to

appear, we realised we were headed into the hills.

'Is this where your parents live?' Lizzy had asked, carefully.

I had shaken my head, relieved that they were still a long way to the south.

Still we didn't stop. The airport gone from our thoughts. The safety and monotony of Carousel a million miles away. When the highway turned too steep we disembarked and pushed the bikes upward on foot. The bush closed in around us and we calmed a little. Sprawling mansions began to pop up on private driveways and alcoves. They hung on the hillside and peered westward to the city and ocean as Perth did its best impression of LA. We passed dozens of them before Taylor spotted solar panels on a roof and we found ourselves a new place to hide.

That night we had collapsed on the plush poolside furniture and woke to a cool westerly and clusters of mosquito bites at our ankles. The three of us froze when a shaggy patchwork border collie surfaced from behind the trees at our yawning. This time Lizzy did crouch down. The dog dipped his head and carefully considered the thinning indie rock star. Satisfied, he trotted over for the greatest pat of his life and has been by Lizzy's side ever since.

So there we were. Sheepish and ashamed at how quickly the outside world had sent us packing. We felt like spoilt teenagers, lasting just weeks in the real world

before whimpering back to our cushy suburban lives. If we had grown up during our time in Carousel, it sure didn't feel like it anymore.

I dangled my legs in the pool we had spent days cleaning and watched the Finns in their latest routines. Lizzy on a deckchair, reading some Hemingway from the mansion's slimline bookshelves. Jeans folded carefully at her ankles. A man-size pale-blue business shirt swallowing her waist and torso. Ray-Bans hiding her eyes as she flicked pages, often looking back on something she just read while she traced the squares on Chessboard's coat. The world alters irrevocably, yet Lizzy Finn still looks ready for a photoshoot.

Taylor was a different story. Powering through laps of the pool before stretching, as she did now, for a good hour on the warming pavers. Always preparing, building, thinking. Devising elaborate plans before silently changing her mind and making some more. It had taken her just months to sum up the cavernous confines of Carousel. Now she was trying to do the same for an entire city. Lizzy and I would catch her staring down at the sprawling, empty suburbs. Not looking, assessing. Tracing roads and highways. Tiny paths that looked safe and empty from a distance. Houses and buildings. Maybe some with food. Most probably without. Her gaze would often end looking north. Past the houses and the factories. Through the bushland and the roaming Bulls. To the dormant grey of the airport.

Less than a year ago we had seen an Air Canada plane coming in to land there. Its link to Taylor and Lizzy still felt tangible and strong. All of us wanted to survive whatever was happening. Maybe even escape it somehow. But more than that – we wanted to know what it was.

In a way there were answers all around us. In the buildings that stood upright. Tired and empty, but otherwise unaffected. In the lack of bodies. The pockets of power still fuelling random places like Carousel and the mini-mart, but nowhere else. The fading signs of their inhabitants. The lightshow that swept out of the city every night. Beams and waves of beautiful light. Constructed, timed and simulated in a manner that could be considered art and nothing else.

And our time in Carousel. Rocky. Rachel. Peter. The doors. The album. They weren't things we were ready to talk about. But they were bound up in everything we had seen since our escape. We took in all of these factors, added them together, and landed at a single theory. Something that had sparked in Taylor Finn long ago. An idea that filled me with a nausea so intense that at times it would keel me over. Something that made no sense, but also the only sense. That somebody, somehow, had sheltered artists from the apocalypse.