

OLD SCORES

DAVID WHISH-WILSON

ABOUT THE BOOK

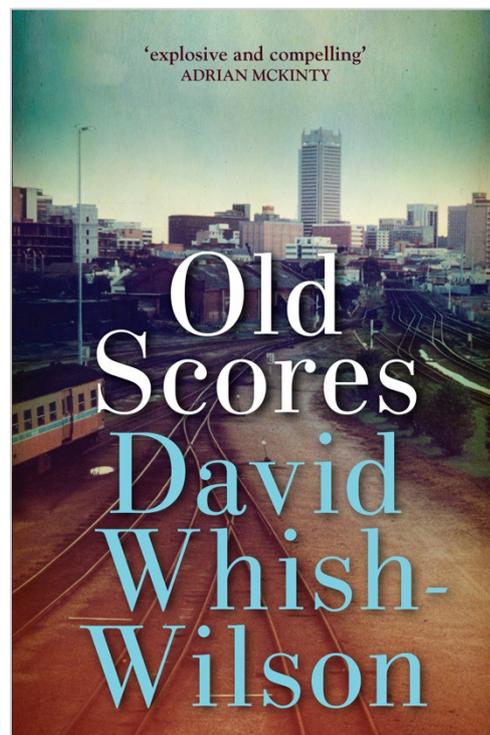
It's the early 1980s: the heady days in Western Australian state politics of excess, dirty secrets and personal favours. Former detective Frank Swann is still in disgrace, working as a low-rent PI. But when takes a security job by the premier's fixer, it soon becomes clear that someone is bugging the premier's phone – and it may cost Swann more than his job to find out why. *Old Scores* is the third novel in the Frank Swann crime series, the earlier two being *Line of Sight* and *Zero at the Bone*. This novel can be read as third in the series, or it can be read as stand-alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Whish-Wilson was born in Newcastle, NSW, but grew up in Singapore, Victoria and WA. He left Australia aged eighteen to live for a decade in Europe, Africa and Asia, where he worked as a barman, actor, street seller, petty criminal, labourer, exterminator, factory worker, gardener, clerk, travel agent, teacher and drug-trial guinea pig. He now lives in Fremantle and coordinates the creative writing program at Curtin University. His 2014 novel, *Zero at the Bone*, was shortlisted for a WA Premier's Book Award as well as a Ned Kelly Award. David is also the author of *Perth* (NewSouth Publishing City Series, 2013).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the old scores in this novel, and who needs to settle them?
2. What kind of a man is Frank Swann?
3. Would you describe him as a man of his time?
4. How does Swann differ from other detective figures you have encountered?
5. What is Swann's relationship to the world of law and order?
6. Swann has been hired as Heenan's fixer: what is it that Heenan wants 'fixed'?
7. From a historical perspective, what aspects of this novel resonated for you (think Perth in the early 1980s, WA Inc., the Burke Labor Government ...)?
8. Where do the power and the money reside in Swann's town?
9. What kind of a man is the premier, this man who 'swims with sharks'?
10. What kind of a man is his father, Stormy Farrell? Do they share the same moral compass?
11. What kind of a man is Hogan?
12. How are the local Noongar people depicted in this 1980s version of Perth? How are the echoes of our colonial past evident in this portrayal?
13. How do these echoes on 1980s Perth make themselves felt today? Has the city changed? Have we?
14. If the ultimate task of crime fiction is to arrive at a resolution, is it possible to say that old scores have been settled by the time the novel ends?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Your fiction not infrequently feels unnervingly close to real life, especially when it touches on some of the seamier aspects of Western Australia's recent political and criminal history. Where do you as a writer draw the line between fact and fiction?

The earlier crime novels have been very well received, and I think that's because I base much of my narrative on stories told to me by people from the period. I aim to write a gripping crime story that will appeal to a broad readership, but also that reflects something specific about the city that I love and call home. One of the strengths of crime fiction is that it foregrounds place and setting, both to create atmosphere and tone, but also to explore what makes one place and its crime different from every other place. Some of the institutional crime that I look at in *Old Scores* is specific to the Perth of a certain period – when cowboy capitalism was pretty rampant and the kind of cronyism that had always been there became visible for a short while – the mask had slipped in other words. I think that crime fiction is perfect not only to entertain but also to explore untold histories and social issues that are important. I'm interested in the way crime fiction can be employed as a vehicle to examine the human condition, but not in a way that represents crime as something exclusively done by aberrant individuals, a la the serial killer genre. I'm more interested in crime that is institutional and political, with organised crime and its impact on civil society being the perfect example.

You've been in the headspace of the character Frank Swann for some years now. Do you see much of yourself in him, or has he remained a separate entity?

Frank has always been different from me, although in a sense we've been on similar journeys. Frank is someone who has been tested, who has lived through some extreme experiences and who therefore knows what he is and what he isn't. We share some similar things (and live in the same house, believe it or not, which makes his home life easy to describe) – in that he isn't the alienated alcoholic loner familiar to the genre, but instead is part of a loyal and loving family. In this sense he's a classical Australian crime fiction protagonist – not a 'hero' but an ordinary person who finds himself in extraordinary circumstances.

Has researching and writing crime changed the way you see your state?

It has and it hasn't. Working in the prison system, and knowing some people from that world, and relying on interviews and information from people of that world has opened my eyes to some things that I might've otherwise missed. And yet the way I see it, crime is part of every society, and knowing about some of the things that go on here, often in plain sight, doesn't diminish my love for this place and my feeling of gratitude that I get to live here.

When you write about the place you live, you are not only reflecting but defining the way we see a place. How do you think your work – and, more broadly, how do you think the crime fiction genre – contributes to a state's identity and its cultural capital?

That's an important question, and touches on the importance of ethical representation of things like crime and the effects of crime on ordinary people. This is why I try to use stories that reflect something of the truth of this place. Or, to paraphrase, I try and accord with the words of the great American writer Flannery O'Connor when she said of her own work that 'the truth isn't distorted, but distortion is used to get at the truth.' Not all of my representations of this place are flattering, and yet I've been paid the compliment many times over the years by people who've contacted me to say, on the one hand 'finally someone has written about this', and on the other hand 'I didn't know that about my city, but now I'm glad that I do.'

What's next for David Whish-Wilson?

I'm going to keep writing crime fiction. For a bit of a change in terms of period, I've just finished a draft of a crime novel set in 1849 San Francisco, featuring an historically accurate crime gang made up of Australian ex-convicts, who took over organised crime in that city's early days. On the non-fiction side, and building on my approach to writing creative non-fiction featured in my 2013 book, *Perth*, I have a social history of the

BOOK CLUB NOTES

Cathedral Square and Treasury buildings coming out next year, and a collaborative book with friend Sean Gorman titled *Derby: WA Footy Fans on the Game's Greatest Rivalry*, about the West Coast Eagles and Fremantle Dockers, both with Fremantle Press.

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