

## DEATH LEAVES THE STATION

ALEXANDER THORPE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

In the summer of 1927, eighteen-year-old Mariana Harris of Halfwell Station is about to meet two strangers. One is a wandering friar dressed as a beggar and claiming not to possess a name; the other is a corpse.

When the dead man vanishes, leaving behind only bloodstained stones in the bush, Detective Sergeant Parkes of the imposing moustache is called to Halfwell to investigate.

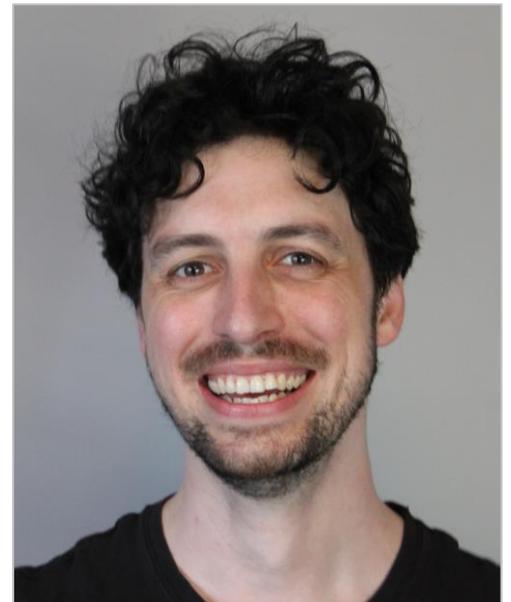
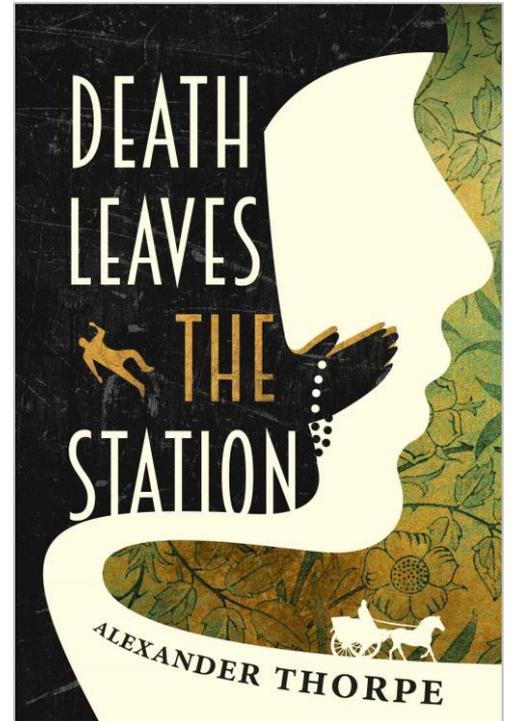
In the uneasy company of Parkes and a local tracker named Cooper, Mariana and the friar join the search for the missing corpse. The investigation becomes more perplexing at every turn, as the four travel from the state's mid-west down to the metropolis of Perth, uncovering by degrees secrets which have lain hidden for decades.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Thorpe grew up in the suburbs to the south of Perth, Western Australia. He has written about the virtues of artificial turf as an advertising copywriter, explored the fringes of the former Soviet Union as an English teacher and accidentally sealed his own feet in concrete during a blissfully brief stint as a construction hand. When not writing, Alexander can be found inflicting his idiosyncratic brand of English on innocent students, exploring new frontiers in miserable music or embracing his insomnia in the company of an old British radio drama. *Death Leaves the Station* is his first novel.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What resonances and expectations lie in this novel's title?
2. What would you identify as the characteristics of 'cosy crime'?
3. Who is your favourite character in this novel, and why?
4. This is a crime novel in the style of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. What is the effect of inserting an Australian setting into this 'Golden Age' narrative?
5. This is also a classic whodunnit: who killed the corpse, where did he go, and why? But to what extent is it more than that? At what stage does the reader realise that there are other mysteries to consider?
6. In what ways does the world of Mariana Harris change between the beginning and end of the novel?
7. How would you describe the social and moral terrain of this particular era in this particular setting?
8. What are the differences in perspectives held by characters like Parkes and the Harrises who inhabit the mainstream, and those who are outsiders, like the friar?
9. What do you see as the differences between the investigative styles of Detective Sergeant Arnold Parkes and the friar?
10. To what extent would there have been no death to investigate if there were no secrets in this tale?
11. In what ways does this novel explore the erasure of identity?
12. What are the costs of these kinds of obliteration and what damage have they caused to the characters in this novel and to those in the world around them?
13. Is it racist to write about racism by portraying it through fiction? How does an author help a reader to understand that character views are not necessarily shared by an author?



14. One of the roles of a crime novel is to restore social order by the end: is that what happens in this novel? And how is social 'disorder' managed or contained in this 1927 rural Australian setting?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***This book begins with an author note acknowledging the original inhabitants of the land on which you write and the historical context of some of the attitudes that appear in your novel. What do you see as the challenges and responsibilities of the writer who enters this kind of moral and actual terrain?***

I suppose the challenge in historical representation is one of balance – you don't want to sweep all of those harmful attitudes under the rug, so it's important to acknowledge their existence, but I think there's also a duty to ensure that you're clearly portraying those ideas as negative. This is true of a lot of issues, but the historical relationship between Indigenous Australians and settler Australians feels particularly sensitive because its impacts are still so powerful today, seen in things like the gap in life expectancy and the number of deaths in custody. I'm not Indigenous, but then again, I'm not a woman or a police sergeant, either, so my approach to writing these characters is similar: I try to research, read widely from a range of perspectives and consult others to gain insight.

***Do you see cosy crime fiction as a useful way of holding up a mirror to ourselves, or is its purpose primarily to entertain?***

I think that good cosy crime fiction can do both. On the face of it, cosy mysteries are pure escapism – there's no gore, no threat of sexual violence, none of the more 'realistic' dangers that many other mystery or thriller books are built around – and that can make them seem like pure light entertainment. I don't think it's possible, though, to write a story without reflecting society. The act of creating characters and weaving a plot together speaks volumes about how an author sees the world, whose stories are told, who is worthy of representation and who isn't. The plots in cosy mysteries also deal in the very real emotions that motivate people. Fear, greed and jealousy are things that we all wrestle with, so I think that we can all see ourselves in these stories, even if we've never been tempted to lurk behind the curtains of the drawing room and drop arsenic into someone's tea.

***Your writing seems to be infused with a kind of restrained ebullience at presenting a story that would not be out of place the era of Josephine Tey, John Dickson Carr and Agatha Christie. What is it about the books of this style and epoch that bring you joy? What were the surprises taking the genre into an Australian setting?***

Restraining my ebullience is always the biggest writing challenge for me. I love the process of stringing individual sentences together in itself, not just in service to the plot, and it's easy to get lost in runaway dependent clauses. I think that the style of those interwar mysteries gives me a lot of space to play with language in a way that wouldn't feel quite appropriate in other contexts: there's a lot of room for superlatives, dated vocabulary and sputtering expressions of shock.

The other thing that keeps drawing me back to the genre is the expectation. When you start reading this type of mystery, there are some things you're expecting to encounter – an idiosyncratic amateur detective, evidence revealed in careful increments and a climactic scene where all the characters are assembled in one room to hear the truth revealed. I think a formula that strong provides plenty of opportunities to subvert expectations – as Josephine Tey does so well – and even throw some knowing winks to the reader. I feel like I'm trying to honour and pay tribute to that tradition, while still having a lot of fun with it. Using an Australian setting was a part of that; instead of country houses and rolling green hills, we have wide brown plains and the endless coastline, but the sheer space provides narrative opportunities that just aren't available in London and the Home Counties.

***Are we going to see more of the characters that we meet in Death Leaves the Station in a future book? Will Parkes ever resolve the marital impasse and shave off his moustache?***

The mendicant is accompanying me into the next book. I love his character; he has the freedom to wander almost anywhere and is adept at gaining people's trust, but he's still on a road to emotional recovery. His next adventure is more in the direction of a classic John Dickson Carr locked-room mystery, set in the state's south-west. Unfortunately, there's not much call for Parkes to be down in that corner of the world, so his fate (and that of his moustache) will have to wait – perhaps for a later caper!