

Peter Temple's *Truth* and Truthfulness: 'the liquid city, the uncertain horizon'

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1 Towards *Truth*

Australians have always been welcoming to crime fiction (Knight, *Continent of Mystery*, 'Origins and Sins' 10–57). Bushranger ballads and squatter thrillers explored varied early wrongs, and rights; Victoria had two of the world's first women crime writers, Ellen Davitt with *Force and Fraud* (1865) and Mary Fortune, whose many stories from 1866 often featured the detective skills of mounted trooper Mark Sinclair. Major authors Marcus Clarke and 'Rolf Boldrewood' published crime-related novels and Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886), set and first published in Melbourne, became London's first best-selling crime novel.

Twentieth-century Australian crime writers like Louis Becke and Beatrice Grimshaw expanded the setting of mysteries to the islands in the north, as did actor Errol Flynn, who based his capable novel *Showdown* (1946) on his earlier journalistic travels. The bush was backdrop for Randolph Bedford's early twentieth-century stories about 'Billy Pagan,' mining engineer, and Arthur Upfield created 'Bony,' part-Indigenous university graduate whose mother's people's skills helped him solve distant rural murders. Mid-century women writers mostly returned to the city—June Wright of Melbourne developed the nun-detective Mother Paul, 'Margot Neville' produced English-style Sydney area mysteries, and a little later Pat Flower specialised in the psycho-thriller.

Jon Cleary made a distinct development with his Sydney cop Scobie Malone, starting in the 1960s—the police had been less than popular in local crime fiction, an attitude no doubt reaching back to convict days—and another major change occurred when, as English links had grown weaker, the largely-ignored American private eye was adopted in Sydney when in 1980 Peter Corris created discreetly tough Sydney detective Cliff Hardy; Marele Day's feminist parallel was tall, clever Claudia Valentine. They inspired a growing number of Australian crime writers who followed them, with over a hundred at work in the twenty-first century.

In spite of its antiquity and general quality, Australian crime writing was only really known at home, with a few exceptions. Upfield did well with Doubleday of New York when America entered the war, and after that he sold steadily in the UK and has maintained European popularity, notably in Germany, where he tends to be read as against English colonialism. Corris and Day had some impact in the USA, as did Kerry Greenwood with Melbourne's glamorous 1920s Hon. Phryne Fisher, and Claire McNab first published in America her well-received Sydney-based lesbian police detective Carol Ashton—they were also increasingly translated in Europe and Asia. The final move away from the previously largely isolated status of Australian crime fiction has been worldwide recognition for the work of Peter Temple, whose variety and confidence in plotting and characterisation have taken the steady achievement of Australian crime writing to a new and internationally high level of recognition.

Temple himself is international, born and brought up in South Africa, working there and then in Germany as a journalist and subeditor. He arrived in Australia in 1980 where he soon became the first editor of the influential magazine *Australian Society*, and then taught writing at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, before starting to produce fiction and, from 1995 on, making that his profession.

He is best known for the four novels focussed on Jack Irish, a shrewd and courageous former lawyer who pursues cases that interest him through the alleyways of Melbourne into the mysterious contexts of international, and usually corrupt, business. His narratives are rich with the colloquial language and varied concerns of the city: Aussie Rules figures prominently—Jack, son of a Fitzroy star, consoles elderly local drinkers about the displacement of their team to Brisbane. He also likes horse-racing, helping a former jockey who specialises in surprise wins for unnoticed horses: a calm, tough part-Indigenous man provides the muscle, including for Jack when needed. Even part-time cabinet-making is wryly presented side-interest for Jack. Well-written, with interestingly varied plots including both action and reflection, and not ignoring Jack's liaisons with professional women capable of sudden sensuality, the series was highly successful, and has moved recently to another generic level with three telemovies based on the novels and a new six-part series—all featuring the compelling presence of Guy Pearce as Jack.

The Irish novels did not come out in unbroken sequence. Temple is a notably innovative writer, saying in an interview with David Honeybone 'I think you can get bogged down in writing the same type of thing over and over again, and you need to challenge yourself' (Honeybone 3). Accordingly, each of his Irish series alternated with stand-alone novels using different heroes and settings. After the first Jack Irish book, *Bad Debts* (1996) he wrote *An Iron Rose* (1998), a novel which in plot and mood looks forward to the very successful *The Broken Shore* (2005). It is also set in southern Victoria; the focal figure, Mac Faraday, a cop who is a hobby blacksmith (hence the title), has a smart lady, Indigenous friends and a strong Aussie Rules interest. He also investigates past paedophilic crimes, here relating to a girls' home. Temple returned to Irish in the well-structured *Black Tide* (1999) but in the same year published *Shooting Star* (1999), an abduction conspiracy set in Melbourne featuring an ex-soldier and ex-cop, less complex and interesting than Jack Irish, who returned at his best in *Dead Point* (2000). Then Temple internationalised his focus with *In the Evil Day* (2002)—in the USA given the feeble title *Identity Theory* (2004): moving through South Africa, Germany and Britain, this was a version of the international thriller, to which Temple has not returned. Irish starred for the last time, so far, in *White Dog* (2003). More relaxed than the others, its return to Aussie Rules pub people and cabinet-making seems somewhat tired, and it provides Jack with little sexual activity—though still amusing and ironical, with a well-shaped plot focussing on the power of very big business to destroy ordinary lives.

Highly capable as these novels are, especially the Irish-focussed ones, Temple's next production was a notable and confident advance both in terms of theme and style and also in its reception. He has said he worked especially long and hard on *The Broken Shore* (2005) as he wanted 'to write a bigger book' (Onatade 1), and for many it remains his best, easier to relate to than the complex and demanding *Truth*—though there are substantial links between the two novels (Knight, 'Peter Temple' 77–79).

In its high-octane development of *An Iron Rose*, *The Broken Shore* focuses on Joe Cashin, a Melbourne cop seriously wounded, physically and psychologically, when his car was attacked by a drug gangster and his Vietnamese off-sider Diab was killed. Posted in recovery to the country

south-west of Melbourne, he is slowly restoring his parental home—Temple heroes are craftsmen at heart—with the assistance of his dogs and a swagman. Joe has family who are part-Indigenous, and an element of the story is the brutal treatment by local cops of the precolonial owners of Australia. An emerging theme, which within ten years would be of urgent national import, exposes past paedophilic practices at a local school, which were consciously overlooked by the educational and religious authorities and even, it is finally revealed, by the long-standing and much-admired boss of the Melbourne detectives, Singleton, known as Singo. In this inquiry Cashin is helped by an Indigenous detective Paul Dove, and one of the recurring characters is Cashin's Indigenous school-friend, who has become an important new-style politician. Temple moves into complex and crucial modern political areas here—though Cashin's story also remains personal, with, as usual, a professional woman, a lawyer from a neighbouring property, who cannot ultimately restrain her attraction to the hero.

Strongly-plotted, and written with a confident style that can range from police jargon to Cashin's perceptions of his beautiful environment, this novel is a major achievement, a good deal more serious and less simplistic in its problem-solving than the earlier novels—John West-Sooby writes about its insistent stress on social 'dysfunction' and 'rupture' (96). In Australia it was joint winner of the 2005 Ned Kelly Award for the best crime novel of the year in Australia. That was not new—Temple had already won four Kellys (two of them joint awards)—but it also won the Colin Roderick award for Best Australian Book and the Australian Publishers' Award for 'best general fiction.' The novel also broke through to international acclaim, being published and warmly reviewed in the USA and Britain: Temple was the first Australian writer to win in 2007 the very prestigious British Gold Dagger Award for crime fiction, known in the modern world of sponsorship as the Duncan Lawrie Dagger.

Temple was apparently not tempted to continue a Cashin series, but rather chose to deal with his darker Melbourne-based colleague Villani. He has said the next book 'was written at a more leisurely pace' than usual (Cornwell 2), in part because of an Australia Council for the Arts grant, but he also felt he needed the time, finding the novel difficult to complete. In an interview with Ramona Koval he discusses this difficulty and credits his publisher and editor Michael Heywood with substantial support and encouragement (Koval 5–6).

2 Plot and Structure in *Truth*

The novel opens with three deaths, the murder of a young mother and her child in the impoverished south-western Melbourne suburb of Altona, and then the suicide of the husband and father. We hear no more about them: this is not the start of the plot, just the grim context of police work in a modern capital city. Temple's fiction usually starts with a small-scale event involving people the detective knows well—the missing son of his father's old friend in *Dead Point*, the apparent robbery and murder of a rural neighbour in *The Broken Shore*—and slowly shows how that local mystery links to a large-scale story of criminal corruption involving important people from politics and international business. *Truth* starts more randomly with the three deaths, and then develops its main plot differently from the norm, not bothering with the low-level intimate start. The opening puzzle for Inspector Villani and his team is the death, probably murder, of a young woman in the very expensive Prosilio Tower flats above the brand-new Orion casino in Melbourne's brash new Docklands. From the start the building's owners try to stop investigations, anxious to sustain the value of the apartments, and pressure is applied at the highest level in politics and the police. This early event and its consequences will take Villani and the reader right through to the final revelation of massive corruption, involving ministers of state and very wealthy locals, focussing on the new money-spinner, an aerial rail

system for Melbourne boulevards. Leading figures in that project will be revealed as the cruel fun-lovers who left a young girl dead after a brutal orgy, and Villani's final success will at least stop their activities in both personal malpractice and corrupt capitalist endeavour.

The second crime that confronts the police seems underworld-connected: three men are found dead in a garage in the mid-Melbourne suburb of Oakleigh, two of them savagely tortured. It is not long before they are identified as belonging to a drug gang led by the Croatian Matko Ribaric; good police work produces leads, and then surveillance of two suspects, but suddenly they escape, not in the car that had been traced to them but in one which suddenly explodes.

But this is not gang business: it too involves corrupt authority. Technical experts—there is much high-order phone, IT and CCTV activity in this novel—trace some calls that make it look as if the killers were warned, but then themselves murdered, and increasingly the whole Oakleigh case and its strange resolution is linked back to police headquarters. Where in *The Broken Shore* the senior policeman Singleton merely covered up a crime, here Deke Murray, a retired officer, has worked up a scheme to avenge himself on the Ribarics because they had killed Dave Cameron, policeman son of his colleague Matt—but actually his own child—and also Dave's girlfriend, pregnant with Murray's grandson; then he executed by car explosion the killers, themselves ex-cops, to cover his tracks.

Villani's solution leads to Murray's suicide, but that is not the end of police corruption. As the novel finishes the newly appointed police chief is Dance, a man who had given Villani money in the past, when he was in trouble through gambling. After Dance shot an unarmed minor criminal named Quirk he made Villani complicit in a cover-up suggesting the shooting was self-defence—and forgave Villani the debt. Dance is now in the clear over all that, in spite of some recent anxieties, and is promoted to the top rank. Villani's last police action in the novel is to find a tape Quirk made proving Dance's corruption, but nevertheless he accepts Dance's offer to move up to Crime Commissioner: he knows he will do the job better than most of the semi-corrupt egotists at the top of the force. Good policing, like state politics, apparently cannot elude contact with forms of corruption.

Any clear truth is hard to find here. The main plot strands reveal that the social authorities who appear as custodians of order and rectitude, whether in business and politics or in the police themselves, can be deeply suspect and can themselves generate serious crimes. Less than perfect though Villani is, even in policing, and more so in personal terms, he is not corrupted; his dedication to inquiry and his persistence in pursuing small details are the only reasons that light is ultimately shed on the grim nature of this modern world—he can at least offer some elements of truthfulness.

That overall dark image is intensified and supported by a sequence of minor scenes and references from the present and the past, which underline the complex and often negative fluidity of the city and its activities, including major instances of recent urban trauma in Melbourne. The novel makes an early reference to the Westgate Bridge tragedy of 1970 in which thirty-five builders died; Villani then thinks about the Russell Street bombing in 1986 when vengeful criminals blew up a car outside police headquarters, injuring twenty-two and fatally wounding a young policewoman; he later recalls the Clifton Hill massacre of 1987 when nine people were shot dead by a deranged young man. In the action of the novel minor events recurrently point to the darkness of the city, from the initial three deaths onwards: the humour the Jack Irish novels offer through ancient Fitzroy supporters, cabinet-making or folkloric racing episodes is never offered.

There are also themes broader than past Melbourne crises. The Villani family property is in Selborne, an invented farming area in hilly rural Victoria, and fires threaten it throughout the story—Villani and his two brothers return to help their father, and finally through good luck little damage is done to the property. This was highly contemporary—Temple was well-advanced with the novel when bush-fires swept across southern Victoria in January 2009, taking a hundred and seventy-three lives. That story of natural danger is negatively matched by Villani's father's remembrance of his days in Vietnam—a politically-generated shadow that also fell across the earlier life of army officer Jack Irish. Another potent national narrative, handled less fully and less negatively here than in *The Broken Shore*, focusses on Paul Dove, Indigenous policeman. Recovered from his injuries at the end of the previous novel and seconded into the murder squad, he often receives partial insults, but he will become Villani's trusted assistant, a model of integration.

The way some of Temple's themes reach out testifies to his serious intelligence as a novelist. But this is above all a novel of remorseless urban reality and scepticism about simple solutions, in its plotting and in the responses of the characters, especially Villani. As he thinks he is closing in on the Oakleigh killers, with the media and the politicians on his back, as he hears about four more local crimes that day, all cruel and petty, as he will very shortly talk to his father about the bushfire he faces, and also to his daughter about her missing drug-addicted younger sister, Villani looks out of a window and sees 'the liquid city, the uncertain horizon' (123).

This sense of uncertainty and doubt about the setting and its people is essentially contradictory to, and substantially more searching than, the usual simple, if also complicated, answers provided at the end of the traditional mystery novel. This essential complexity, this hesitant uncertainty about real truthfulness, is a notable feature of Temple's developed fiction, and a major reason for its worldwide success with readers and award-givers. While there will be plot explanations to come, Temple will also make them suggest further areas of doubt about modernity, and the novel will finally address its ultimate theme of uncertainty and anxiety in a Villani memory which reaches back, in something like Jack Irish terms, to a favourite dead racehorse, whose name was Truth. But before reaching that moving and mythical moment, the novel outlines many detailed complexities of events and personality, most of them featuring Villani himself.

3 How Truthful is Steven Villani?

As liquid as the city, as uncertain as its horizon, are the personal life and attitudes of the central character: his actions and attitudes construct a set of partial and even inconsistent truth-elements, rather than any simple approach to a uniform truth, as the novel's title might, apparently mockingly, seem to offer. Villani appeared briefly in *The Broken Shore* as a former colleague and continuing friend of Joe Cashin—Joe stayed with Villani when he came to the city after his brother's suicide attempt. Irish's wife was murdered before the first novel and their one daughter stays far away in North Queensland, but Villani's family is much more present throughout *Truth*, in the events that shaped him as a young man and continue to claim his anxious attention—and especially through his largely unsuccessful management of his Melbourne family.

'Guilt, there was always guilt' (24) Villani thinks, as he reflects about how long it is since he has seen his vulnerable fifteen-year-old younger daughter Lizzie, and at the same time he has no idea where his wife Laurie is currently working on a film shoot. Only as an efficient cop, not as a father, does he help Corin, the older daughter, when she is worried about some men

outside her house in a car—he sends uniformed police who find just a couple of drunks waiting to beat up the lover of one of their wives. Dedicated attention to routine Melbourne criminal chaos is not a good mode for a family man: when Lizzie is picked up incapable through drugs after she has stolen money and valuables from home, Villani is too busy to help, and she is put in a cell. His wife returns that night from a north Queensland film site and picks Lizzie up from jail, but she immediately runs away again.

He sets the full police system to find her, thinks often of her, but she has gone feral: he only hears of her from press reports in which she claims he sexually abused her. For all her haunting of Villani's memories and his sense of guilt, he only meets Lizzie again when she is dead from an overdose, though she has rung Laurie to say she made up the sexual abuse story. At the start of the novel, when Villani saw the dead girl in the Prosilio Tower, 'for a terrible heart-jumping instant' (5) he thought she was Lizzie, and that perception turns out to be all too true.

Villani's wife is furious when he leaves Lizzie in the cell; in his own marital outrage he blames her for being away with, he suggests, a favourite cameraman—she has admitted to a love affair in the past. In response she looks at him with 'disgust on her mouth' (154), and he immediately, and apparently permanently, packs up and leaves home. Villani himself, like his wife, has had other partners in the past, one the mother of his ever-distant son Tony, and now, like one of Jack Irish's glamorous professionals, there is slender Anna Markham, a well-bred journalist, with her own limits—she can make use of their contact to break a sensational story, and can avoid him at public events when it seems in her interest. One night he thinks 'I'm in love with her,' but then comes the negative response: 'Stupid childish thought. He shook his head and shuddered as if that could dispel it' (203). Then they talk intimately, self-revealingly, and he thinks 'That was the moment to choose another life. Start another life with her' (206). Yet at once he reverts imaginatively to his police identity, reflects on the city's chaotic night noises and 'sour human breaths' (207), and then turns back into the past, to that other part of his personal life, also a good deal less than successful, which apparently generated his high-skill, low-emotion response to life and people. 'He thought about the dawn walks with his father Bob when he was a boy, after the trees were in leaf, the silence of the world, the chill air you could drink' (207).

Rural family life was emotionally sparse: his mother was a teacher with mental illness who disappeared when Villani was twelve; the father returned from Vietnam unwilling to speak of his experiences, like so many real soldiers, and projecting that silence and distance in his own emotional life. Villani, the eldest son, was almost never treated with any affection—and in any case Bob was away all week driving long-distance lorries. The two younger brothers, Mark the favourite and Luke, a half-brother from his father's casual pick-up, were only a little more warmly treated by the father—'Mark and Luke were Villani's first children in a way' (266).

He uses his father's own method of determined silence as a form of control at work, and he knows he handled his younger brothers that way as well. One became a dubious doctor, the other a race-caller, neither with grand personal lives—Mark in contact with drugs and gangsters, Luke, married with children but turning up at the father's house with what Villani sees as 'dumb teenage weathergirl arse' (266). The father now lives alone, helped only by Gordie, a young neighbour of limited intelligence, whose father left before he was born after a row and fight with Bob. This was apparently related to the fact, which Villani finally realises, that Gordie is Bob's own son, who stays loyally with him, being there at the end when his three half-brothers visit the bush property, threatened by fires. In as close as this novel comes to a benign outcome the trees are spared, including the forest, mostly of oaks, which Villani planted

when young with his father—the fire only sings the edge of this single element of growth and natural positivity in the whole book. By making them oaks, ancient European trees, Temple may be suggesting the value of Australia's international connections, much as in *Bad Debts* he revealed that Jack Irish was not Irish at all, that his great-grandfather was a Hamburg Jew named Reich: Melbourne locals could not manage that name, and 'Rish' became 'Irish.'

On several occasions the novel makes references linking Bob Villani with Singo, the dead but still emotionally present former head of the Murder Squad. It is apparent that where Villani's personal life of past and present family is a mixture of incompetent distance and regretful feeling, as both son and father, the police life is, following Singo, intensely busy and emotionally interactive. It can present its own disturbance: 'Villani thought about the dead he had seen. He remembered them all,' and he re-experiences a whole paragraph of

people shot, stabbed, strangled, brained, crushed, poisoned, drowned, electrocuted, asphyxiated, starved, skewered, hacked, pushed from buildings, tossed from bridges. There could be no unstaining, no uninstalling, he was marked by seeing those dead as his father was marked by the killing he had done, the killing he had seen. (29)

Nevertheless Villani still has spirit, though it is not always benign—Kiely, the New Zealand misfit in this team, says his jokes are 'either very crude or very obscure' (81)—and his policing is consistently dedicated and expert. Alone of the detectives he can gain information by simply sniffing a scene—he knows there were two women in one suspect house because of their different scents. He learnt this from Singo, but more like stubbornly persistent Jack Irish is the way he keeps thinking about a crime scene, and sometimes revisits it with success. On return to the site of the mysterious car explosion he finds a mobile phone, damaged but partly readable by the experts; he insists on revisiting with Dove a house where they found precisely nothing and—with more sniffing—finds the Oakleigh murder weapon concealed in barbecue fat.

He also has general persistence, eluding and ignoring the political and police constraints imposed on the two cases, and he has no fear of confrontation. At the high-level social event to which his boss Barry takes him as part of his notional upward career-path, he is polite enough to the very rich Max Hendry, inventor of the new 'Project Airline' above-road transport scheme, but determinedly harasses his son who is, he knows, involved in the Prosilio Tower case. Similarly, he tracks down without fear or collegial favour the police insider behind the Oakleigh killings and the murder of the killers.

But these largely truthful actions are to a degree obscured by doubtful elements in his policing. Being a keen gambler led him into the power of Dance, and his guilt over the death of Quirk leads him to visit Quirk's mother, tend her garden and grow her vegetables: the sentimentality of the scenes, it is evident, is Villani's, not Temple's, and can be linked to the tree-planting rapprochement with his father—his own craftsman element. The strong policing can include a rough approach, whether it is teasing Dove about being in the city, or the more unpleasant anti-Kiwi exchanges with Kiely, whom he feels has been imposed on him as a deputy.

Senior police and the politicians tend to respect Villani—that is why his superior Barry wants to make him a little suaver, fitter for high office, and so at the end he is in the sharply ironic position of being promoted to Commissioner of Crime, chosen by, and serving under the multiply corrupt Dance himself—known with ironic truth to the police as Dancer. His name may be one of the partly playful jokes that underlie Temple's novels. If Villani is to be led a

dance, he has at least survived the evasive and semi-corrupt Barry—a Melbourne Irishman whose name surely references that earlier one, Sir Redmond Barry, who condemned Ned Kelly to death. How ironically playful can Temple be? Irish's name teasingly conceals alien identity; did Cashin, with all his faults, at least avoid cashing in on his position? And does Villani resist almost all the temptations he receives to what is conceivably villainy?

All of Temple's central figures are complex men: the women tend to just have two features, skilled work and sexuality, but the heroes move anti-heroically into guilt, doubt, judgement and continuing efforts to achieve at least something at least in part truthful. Villani is, so far at least, both the most complex—especially in his paternal context—and the one with the most complicated mix of negatives and (ultimately overriding) positives in his work and actions. Jack Irish could enjoy a day at the footie, cabinet-making, or the manipulated races, Joe Cashin could walk with his dogs and breathe in deeply the maritime air: Villani just plods on through the torturous city, its tortured people and their clumsy behaviour and language—a major part of the power and conviction of *Truth* is Temple's serious commitment to a tough, demanding, heavily colloquial style of writing, often closer to aggressive drama than the explanatory and even romantic traditions of the novel, which he has previously fulfilled so well.

4 Ways of Writing Truthfully

Reviewers and commentators on Temple's work often remark on his stylistic variety—to an unusual degree among crime writers he interrelates ironic accounts of the urban context, the tough staccato speech of criminals and detectives, and a more sensitive inner voice sometimes heard from his central characters. This mix is by no means always the same, and Temple appears to have a specific rhetoric in mind for his novels. The Jack Irish stories present the baffling action largely through a resigned, rueful but sensitive voice; in *The Broken Shore* there is from its emotive opening, as Cashin surveys the coast, a recurrence of almost romantic writing to embrace the tough story, so that Patrick Anderson titled his *Washington Post* review 'Brutal Eloquence' and toward the end of the review said Temple 'offers both poetry and gore' (Anderson np).

Truth relies much more heavily on colloquial, tough, direct, often disrupted dialogue and description, but the demanding and special nature of *Truth* goes beyond its tough, colloquial, even obscene, language: it makes many of its enigmatic suggestions through its style. Australian reviewers accepted and admired Temple's demanding linguistic approach in this novel—the *Brisbane Courier Mail* found 'no meandering here, no cluttering of precious words; each one hits the mark,' in Melbourne the *Age* found the style 'precise' and 'telegraphic,' while the *Australian Financial Review* summed up Temple's prose as 'terse and potent, with all the torque of a truck engine' (reviews reprinted, Text Publishing). More challenging than its tough language, and new to Temple, is the disconnected and fragmented style of narrative: in an interview with Fiona Mackrell, Temple said the book 'isn't always easy to read because it wasn't meant to be. It isn't strong on explaining things and it requires a bit of attention to follow what's going on' (Mackrell 2). The kind of truthfulness that is presented is by no means easy to apprehend or establish.

Truth essentially moves from the start to create doubts about simple truthfulness by emphasising a fragmented and disconnected style, in both the speech of characters and the narrator's descriptive voice. It opens by offering a brusque form of truthful writing in detailing a body:

a dead woman, a girl really, dirty hair, dyed red, pale roots, she was stabbed too many times to count. Stomach, chest, back, face. The child, male, two or three years old, his head was kicked. Blood everywhere. On the nylon carpet it lay in pools, a chain of tacky, black ponds. (1)

The novel repeatedly uses lists of detail observed, and no more than scraps of speech, as the police try to make sense of this fragmented world of objects and dehumanised people. The characters also behave in a disconnected way: Villani, after sleeping with Anna and wondering why she likes him, goes home and has far from positive contact with his elder daughter Corin, though he has previously thought of her as ‘his precious girl’ (21). He finds Corin asleep on the sofa: ‘He killed the television, said her name, twice, a third time, she was startled, grumpy, puff-eyed, rose and went away without a kind word’ (111). Villani’s distant relationship with his younger daughter Lizzie will be a main theme in the story, and his son Tony is far away, working on a fishing boat in Scotland—he never rings; in any case Villani thinks he is not his father. Corin says to him ‘you only sleep here, you pass over this house like a cloud shadow’ (115).

Late in the novel, after being tempted by an offer of a Prosilio security job, Villani feels that taking a taxi to his office is going ‘home’ (287). At least the police do speak to each other, but almost never kindly, in short sentences and usually competing for ironic mastery. They arrive at the Oakleigh murder site:

Next was the forensic pathologist, Moxley, a balding ginger Scot. Villani raised a hand.

‘Doctor Death,’ he said.

Moxley grounded his bag. ‘The head of Homicide. Isn’t this early for someone so important?’

‘Never sleep. Three deceased here, two with no clothes on. May I request an extreme hurry-on?’

‘ASAP is always the aim,’ said Moxley.

‘Of course,’ said Villani. ‘Must be painful always to fall short.’ (47–48)

The same sense of disconnection and recurrent malice is communicated by the way in which the action occurs, and responses to it are set out. As Janet Hutchinson comments (6), Temple in this novel tells his story in something like the ‘grabs’ or separated sequences common in films, challenging the audience to make some connecting sense of them, rather than, as is usual in the traditional novel, building up a coherent account bit by linked bit. In *Truth*, the gaps delineate threat, bafflement, incomprehension, the difficulties of shaping a truthful narrative.

There are elements of this jump-cut technique in the other Temple novels, and in much of recent crime fiction, but fragmentation and enigma are in *Truth* made a deliberate way of giving an account of the baffling world. Indeed, Temple has indicated that he values a form of groping for linkages as his own way of writing, saying in a thoughtful interview with Ayo Onatade: ‘The plot has to come to me. I just start off with one thing! This is what’s happened. What’s

going to happen next, I have no idea at all. I believe that's right if I don't know the reader is not going to know either when they read the book' (Onatade 2).

This comment was made after *The Broken Shore* did so well, and the conscious disconnection process it suggests is a good deal stronger in *Truth*. It takes some concentration to work out just what Dance did in the Quirk killing case—the data is given over a series of separated, brief, and in any case enigmatic comments; the complex story behind the Oakleigh killings is arrived at equally erratically until Villani's final interview with Deke Murray. Some things remain puzzling—the recurrent reference to the case of the dead girl on 'the snow road' is of emotive importance but no coherence, and the force and oddity of the behaviour of Singo is scattered throughout the book, repeating his enigmatic master-phrase 'Bomb it to Snake,' which apparently means 'Use police procedures.'

In language as in plot details and personal attitudes, the neat narrow explanations of mystery fiction are avoided, along with the coherently persuasive style that conveys them. The truth itself may be elusive, even, like the city, too liquid for its horizon to be certain, and Temple's style in language and structure enables that dark, complex view to be itself communicated.

5 Is Truth Dead?

Temple's titles tend to be elusive—*Bad Debts* refers to financial problems and is also a wry comment on the threatening action; *Black Tide* and *Dead Point*, though sounding suitably thrilleresque, are in fact just names for a police project and a rural location. *White Dog* is a deliberately casual reference to a very late, and indeed canine, assault on Jack Irish; *The Broken Shore* more purposefully bespeaks the natural power of Cashin's setting and his own imagination. But *Truth*, as a title for a novel about inquiries into issues that mostly elude simply truthful explanation, is nothing but a challenge. In the interview with Cornwell Temple says he always wanted to call this book *Truth*—it is 'in large part about lies public and private so the title spoke to me' (Cornwell 2). It might seem that truth is what all the detectives seek, and in an emotional sense what their children and lovers are looking for—but Temple has something more complex to say than that in the enigmas and uncertainties of the actions and outcomes of the novel.

Temple finally does speak specifically about truth—but with characteristic subtlety and indirectness. Where the equine world was for Jack Irish a source of fun and finance, something less manageable, more disturbing, derives from the connection here. Villani's father loved his horses, a natural opposite to his life at war and in lorries, and late in the novel his son, recoiling from his worst meeting with the slimy politicians was:

unaccountably thinking about the first horse Bob raced, the best horse he ever had, the lovely little grey called Truth who won at her second start, won three from twelve, always game, never gave up. She sickened and died in hours, buckled and lay, her sweet eyes forgave them their stupid inability to save her. (275)

It is apparently no accident that the beautiful mare was grey, and not always a winner. Not only not always successful, or simply black or white, the mare like our idea of possible clear truthfulness may be something we just cannot keep alive. The novel Temple found difficult to write and needed extra time over here reflects on its own subtleties, complexities, its own dynamic and demanding veracities.

In this Temple moves well beyond the traditional limits of crime fiction. A truthful answer, of a limited, merely problem-solving sort, is what the classic clue-puzzle ends with, and so does the tough-guy story. But rather than fingering the greedy relative or the vicious woman who is, typically in Christie and Chandler, permitted to bear all the blame, Temple's novels, especially this one, find guilt shared among almost everybody, a general failure to be truly truthful. He explained his elusive approach to shaping a mystery plot as being based on the fact that 'I hate having things spelled out to me' (Onatade 2), and his approach to the multiple realities of human guilt is also one that finds out complexity through detailed and consistent complication.

He has often been compared to James Ellroy (Honeybone 2, 4; Kornbluth np)—the latter also links Temple to George Pelecanos. In *Truth* the condensed, dialogue-rich style suggests Elmore Leonard, and Temple has praised Leonard's 'ability to capture speech patterns and say a great deal through dialogue and reveal character through dialogue' (Honeybone 4). In his thematic structures, Temple seems to be following with confidence but never too much simplistic clarity the novels of Ellroy and Pelecanos which are like elegies to the modern city, detailing its incoherence, its corruption, the inability of those who try to bring order to do any more than pick off a few overtly villainous people. 'Urban Collapse' is a term that has been used of these writers' central theme (Knight, *Crime Fiction* 209–12)—and Ian Rankin's Edinburgh, James Lee Burke's New Orleans could also be cited, more liquid cities with uncertain horizons. That mood was an element in the Jack Irish books, though often lightened by humour and whimsy, and it seemed to have been made deeper by Cashin's absence from the city—whose own crisis was the cause of his convalescence. But *Truth* is the book where Temple confronts directly this modern urban enigma, the mix of persistent criminals, on the streets and in the places of power, and with only semi-admirable police to confront the resultant and recurring chaos.

It is only in the country that Villani—like Cashin—can feel at rest. Even though it also offers real threats, they are at least coming from nature, not human malice. And it is there, at the heart of his father's own healing process that the dying mare offers both the harsh fact that truth will not live for us and also, through natural generosity, offers forgiveness for our 'stupid inability,' both to save her and manage our lives and our cities in any acceptable way.

The end of the novel looks forward with grim irony—how will Villani cope as Commissioner under the always elusive Dance? What steps will, or can, Villani take to retain his policing potential—and even attain his dream of personal emotional success? Temple has said that he has been working on a third book in the series beginning with *The Broken Shore*, but the idea of a sequel to *Truth* is a forbidding concept. It was a deserving winner of the Miles Franklin Award in 2010, given simply for the best Australian novel of the year, the first crime novel to attain that level, well above the genre-restrained awards Temple had often won before, including in Britain. The truth is that the quality of *Truth* is also its own challenge. The achievement in itself must make a successor uncertain, even doubtful—though readers may indeed still have faith in a writer with Temple's capacity to generate genuinely truthful writing through his remarkable intellectual energy and literary versatility.

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