

Cosy Crime Fiction, Australian Regions and Climate Crisis: Reading Sue Williams's Rusty Bore Series in the Victorian Mallee

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Introduction

Australian genre fiction that engages with regional and rural places, communities and histories is flourishing, with crime fiction a particularly prolific and popular example. Over the last twenty years, crime fiction sales have snowballed, comprising close to one third of the Australian adult fiction market by 2018 (Morris) and in latest figures continuing to grow apace, despite an overall market downturn (Anderson). The most prominent face of Australian crime fiction is “rural noir” (also known as “outback noir”) which has been the focus of scholarly interest for both its huge popularity and its perceived political commentary. This has seen the subgenre increasingly credited for its critiques of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. Often positioned at the other end of the crime fiction spectrum is “cosy crime,” which also engages with rural and regional locations. While rural noir is associated with blasted environments, closed down towns and outsider male detectives, “cosies”—variously known as “cosy mysteries” or “cosy camp” because of its heightened humorous style, as well as “cozies” in the US—are “usually a series of narratives set in one place” (Waters and Worthington 206), generally featuring domestic, community or small town settings, involving local, amateur female sleuths. As the moniker implies, these texts offer a certain cosiness to the reader, with reassuring signifiers such as domestic pets and cups of tea—and with any gory violence happening “off stage.” Rural noir, on the other hand, is intentionally unsettling and graphic in its depiction of criminal violence, as well as social and environmental hardship (Turnbull, “Monstrous Wounds”).

Australian cosy crime is undoubtedly also popular yet tends not to be credited with the same power of critique as its rural noir counterpart. Arguably, there is a gendered dimension to this, as its protagonists are commonly single women who engage in nurturing activities such as cooking and craft, alongside their sleuthing (Waters and Worthington). These signifiers, with their comforting and domestic orientations, might seem to infer a desire to affirm a status quo, rather than to interrogate it. This paper argues that the Australian cosy crime novel deserves consideration as a subgenre entirely capable of engagement with structural violence in addition to the more immediate crimes that initially trigger the sleuthing. We will explore this through a discussion of the Rusty Bore Mysteries series of cosy crime novels by Melbourne-based author Sue Williams. Set largely in the Victorian Mallee region, in the tiny fictional town of Rusty Bore, Williams's novels (*Murder with the Lot*, 2013; *Dead Men Don't Order Flake*, 2016; *Live and Let Fry*, 2018; and *Death at the Belvedere*, 2022) adhere to the conventions of the cosy, with its female, fish and chip shop-owning protagonist, attentive to the dynamics of her small rural town. They also exemplify the critical capacities of Australian cosy crime fiction, in particular its attention to what

has been termed “eco-crime,” alongside a commentary on the economic and social impacts of global capitalism on local communities.

Featuring amateur detective Cass Tuplin, her two sons (one of whom is the local policeman) and a cast of residents who regularly frequent Cass’s fish and chip shop, the *Rusty Bore Mysteries* series offers localised versions of the usual cosy crime features, and is notable for a camp, almost “screwball” style in its action and dialogue. The punning titles of the first three novels in the series reflect the tendency of cosies to signal to readers “that the content is light and that graphic violence, explicit sex, or bad language will be absent” (Waters and Worthington 205). However, the playful use of humour and “off stage” action is blended with direct commentary on the climate crisis in the context of global capitalism and its impact on rural communities, and the exploitative, violent and corrupt structures that support this. Moreover, the rural setting of the novels, in an agricultural area of northwest Victoria, is harnessed by Williams to explore some of the complexities of climate action, especially in regional contexts where 28 percent of the Australian population live (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare). Williams brings nuance to her depiction of rural community attitudes to climate crisis, pointing to the need for alliances and community, rather than individualism and division, and refuses urban-privileging stereotypes.

Our consideration of her work is informed by two reading events held in May 2022 (one in the small Mallee town of Sea Lake with fifteen participants, the other in the adjacent Riverland regional town of Renmark, with approximately forty participants) focused on the *Rusty Bore* novels, with Williams herself in attendance. Part of a larger program of participatory literary events that we have run in the Mallee region, these book discussions illuminated cosy crime fiction’s local, relational and humorous dimensions. The events enabled participants to reflect on their rural places and communities in relation to the themes of environmental and colonial violence and their impacts on the future of rural communities in ways that seem productive for the challenge of navigating climate crisis in regional Australia. Before we arrive at Williams’s cosy crime specifically, we will extend our tour through the terrain of rural noir and “the cosy,” to understand some of the context of crime writing in Australia, and the overlaps and points of difference between these two subgenres.

Crime Fiction in Australia

As critics have long argued, crime fiction is a resonant site for social and cultural anxieties to play out. These anxieties take on a particular inflection in Australian crime fiction due to the brutality and violence of colonisation and its ongoing manifestations. But there is also a long history of Australian crime fiction’s engagement with the colonial scene. In the nineteenth century, as Stephen Knight has indicated, this manifested in the “convict saga and the goldfields mysteries” (144)—iconic settings of the colonising process. Crime fictions from this period evinced a repressed recognition of frontier crimes, sometimes manifested in the “uneasy presence of the Aboriginal [sic]” (158), sometimes more metaphorically expressed. As Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver argue, the gothic tenor of much crime fiction from this period referenced “anxieties that flow from a sense of the colonial landscape as a fluid, transient place, where characters continually slip out of view” (4). This transience references the unstable ground of the colonial project, and the death and dispossession that it wrought. In this tradition, “criminality saturat[es] every level of bush life” (6). The bush unsettled the settler not just because of its unfamiliar and often unnavigable terrains, but because it forced a recognition—however oblique—of the injustice and

illegitimacy of colonisation. This was stolen First Nations Country which became absorbed into a nation founded in crime.

The work of popular fiction in this context, as scholars such as Tanya Dalziel (*Settler Romances*) and Ken Gelder (*Popular Fiction*) have argued, was far from benign. Indeed, the work of popular texts on the Australian frontier “cannot be underestimated” (Dalziel 6). These fictions were sites for the negotiation of “complex settler identities and relations” (Dalziel 8) and, moreover, were active in the “production of settler consent to colonial projects” (Dalziel 6). That is, they enabled settler colonial anxieties to be encysted, excised, or put to rest. Contemporary Australian rural crime fiction is still very much a space in which the dynamics and legacies of colonisation are actively explored. Jesse Schlotterbeck argues that US crime fiction has often positioned the rural as a “redemptive force for urbanites steeped in lives of crime” (2008), but rural noir tends to model the opposite; the rural is a troubling and desiccated space that the detecting protagonist is thrown into and must urgently orientate themselves within. And while non-urban crime settings in the northern hemisphere commonly focus on unpeopled tracts of dense and enclosing forest or snowbound areas, Australian rural noir is often characterised by dry and desolate land, eerie in its unenclosed expanse.

As we have already mentioned, the last two decades have seen a proliferation of rural noir crime fiction published in Australia. Crime novelist Garry Disher—some of whose best-selling works have been characterised as rural noir—identifies the success of two texts in particular, Jane Harper’s *The Dry* and Chris Hammer’s *Scrublands*, as driving the rise of the subgenre in Australia, and growing international markets for these works (“Twisted”). Disher notes that, in contrast to much urban noir, its rural counterpart manifests a strong attention to historical layering and to the proximity of the past. Crimes persist and resonate. Decay and decline abound. It is also incredibly popular, giving rise to a boom that, over the last decade, “has left our publishing industry with the distinct reddish hue of a dust storm” (Burge).

Rural noir centres the human as the clear source of violence inflicted on the more than human world, rather than framing the environment as a malevolent agent. From the publication of *The Broken Shore* by Peter Temple in 2005, to Mark Brandi’s *Wimmera* (2017) to Shelley Burr’s *Wake* (2022), and, of course, Jane Harper, Chris Hammer, and Garry Disher’s own Hirsch series (2013–), crimes are woven through exploited and failing environments, diminishing communities and worn-down individuals, suffused with a weight of inescapability, a feeling that the people in these places, as crime writer Leigh Redhead surmises, have “nowhere to go” (8).

As rural scholarship has demonstrated, the neoliberalisation of economies in the West impacted rural communities through the massification and industrialisation of agriculture, including the withdrawal of state interventions and subsidies (Hinkson; Farrugia et al.). In Australia, a ubiquitous consequence has been the depopulation of regional towns, and the inter-related loss of jobs, infrastructure and community supports. Environmental change, most visible in the intensification of drought conditions, has compounded this but is also connected, as climate change is fuelled by industrialised economies. These entangled forces of disadvantage and decline in rural Australian communities have a visible place in rural noir, writ large in titles such as Harper’s *The Dry* and Hammer’s *Scrublands* and embedded into both setting and plot. Sue Turnbull points to *The Dry* as being redolent with “the ‘signs of a community in poverty’ . . . clearly visible in the run-down buildings and the dilapidated state of the [school] play-ground equipment. Round the back of the school [the detectives] encounter a few ‘sad sheep’ in ‘brown paddocks’” (“Monstrous” 309).

It is because of the prominence of environmental degradation in Australian rural noir that the subgenre has been pegged as a version of “eco-crime” fiction. Eco-crime, or eco-detective fiction, has been theorised as crime fiction that draws attention to environmental exploitation and violence as a related traumatic force amongst human-to-human violence, especially in a context of unfolding climate crisis (Walton and Walton; Puxan-Olivia; Turnbull, “Monstrous”). It is characterised by an insistent connection between individual and collective crime and culpability, where the focus on the “whodunnit” is complicated by the situation of an individual’s suffering in a network of broader complicity and damage connected to structural and systemic violence. In this generic subfield, as Walton and Walton write, “‘the villain’ is never just a single, localised figure,” but extends to “questions of systemic and slow violence in a global context” (3). There is a millennial edge to the rise of eco-crime, and relatedly, rural noir, as the fallout from centuries of capitalist-colonial exploitation is more squarely reckoned with in the public domain. The social anxieties that crime fiction may once have “safely” explored within its confines now overspill the bounds of the text, intersecting with unfinished processes of facing up to the damage done by resource-driven western economies and the land theft and genocide that underscores the Australian nation state.

Australian rural noir connects to this reckoning in Australia, a site for confronting the horror of Australia’s colonial past and present, and the environmental degradations entangled within this (Fetherston; Turnbull, “Monstrous”). Here, the inescapability that Redhead observes in rural noir might well indicate a consciousness of more than just “small town” oppression. It might, instead, speak to our own complicity in what is depicted (more akin to Deborah Rose’s “Anthropocene Noir” (2008)), to the reader’s inability to stand outside and apart from the cause and effects of both dispossession, ongoing colonisation, and climate crisis, despite their very uneven manifestations. This is not to say that rural noir’s engagement with these concerns is unproblematic. *The Dry* has been criticised for a lack of Indigenous representation (Turnbull 6), and—if we read the text’s emphasis on empty, poorly managed lands as a gesture to the crimes of colonisation—Indigeneity remains an absent presence in the text, which arguably perpetuates erasure.

However, not all rural crime fiction remains silent about dispossession. Turnbull points out that Katherine Kovacic’s *The Shifting Landscape* (2020) set in the pastoral Western District of Victoria, is direct in its references to First Nations history and ongoing relations with Country, as well as its discussion of genocidal pasts. Notably, given this distinct presence of unsettling history in Kovacic’s text, Turnbull refers to the cosy crime elements of *The Shifting Landscape* (which include its setting in a luxurious Western District mansion, an amateur sleuth and her endearing wolfhound, and references to lots of comforting food and drink). In contrast to rural noir fiction, cosy crime fiction is known for its local, domestic settings, amateur detection, and the obscuring of “incendiary subject matter” (Masterclass)—as well as other features such as eccentric neighbours, cats and cooking.¹ However, as Waters and Worthington argue, the cosy is also distinguished by threat of intrusion into the community from the “outside” which is frequently connected to structural issues such as economic or social disruptions (the domestic impacts of the Global Financial Crisis on regional towns, for example) (204).

Likely due to domestic settings, and the prevalence of female protagonists in “cosy texts,” there is gendering of cosy crime which might explain its more benign positioning against the “harder” edge of rural noir fiction.² The idea of “cosiness” itself is conventionally aligned with feminised domestic culture, and related associations of passivity, inward-looking concerns and a circle of protection from confronting or threatening forces “outside.” Nevertheless, these

assumptions are misplaced. As geographer Laura Price argues, cosy and comforting practices can also be disruptive and offer strategies for critical and subversive engagement with the world (“Cosy, Comforting, Disruptive?”). In their discussion of *Dead Men Don’t Order Flake*, the reviewer in the *Saturday Paper* concurs:

“Cosy crime” . . . is such a staple of popular entertainment that it’s easy to forget just how perverse its conventions are. . . . There’s often an abundance of snuggly signifiers—cats, cuppas and cardigans—obscuring one incongruous fact: the plot of each episode proceeds from an act of extreme violence. (S.R.)

Unpacking the Rusty Bore Mysteries Series

Our two reading events focused on the Rusty Bore Mysteries series were held as part of the ARC-funded *Reading in the Mallee* project (2021–2024), a reader-centred project of participatory regional literary history. Over 35 reading events, including book groups, shared reading activities, author events and literary walks; the project engaged with an estimated 500 readers located in the Mallee region to generate discussion around a wide range of literary works. These were works directly set in the Mallee, or that reference or were written there; they included works by authors with connections to the Mallee; or they evoked the environment, communities or history of regions like the Mallee, and were what we grew to identify as “Malleeish” texts. Many of these texts expanded the imaginative geography of the Victorian Mallee outside its current administrative designation: an area of roughly 40,000 kilometres in the north-west of the state, that spans the Country of many First Nations groups, including the Latji Latji, Nyeri Nyeri, Ngintait, and Wergaia people.

A history of troubled agricultural colonisation from the mid-19th century onwards has given the Mallee an overwhelming reputation for drought, dust, and hardship rather than literary life. However its storytelling history is tens of thousands of years old, and its literary identity post-colonisation is much richer than has been acknowledged. Our archival research has illuminated a strong history of reading culture and book discussions in the region, as well as enduring efforts to service readers through circulating, mobile and stationary libraries, in addition to book drives and book sellers, across frequently sparsely populated areas and significant distances (Magner and Potter; Magner et al., forthcoming). Our reader events have sought to contribute to this long literary history, co-producing knowledge with Mallee communities. In particular, we have explored how place-based reading practices elicit discussions and understandings about place and communities, and how these might expand or contest—or endorse—prevailing narratives about the Mallee, its history and people.

Although our readers have always been willing to read and discuss what we bring to these events, they have also been direct about their preferences: genre fiction is what most gravitate towards. As our archival research into historic Mallee readers has also revealed, this has always been the case. Our archival research into the records of Mechanics Institute libraries and Free Libraries around the Mallee, including the Mildura Institute, show that romances and crime fiction were sought after, as in other parts of Australia.³ The “Weekly Book Discourse” column by Derby Clonard in the *Ouyen Mail* in the 1930s shows that many Mallee newspaper readers also took an interest in fiction and expressed a desire for homegrown stories.

When we started to prioritise genre fictions, we realised the extent of their regional focus. Crime fiction is often considered the most “legitimate” of popular genres—the sole genre that

those who do not read genre fiction are prepared to countenance, and this relative prestige is reflected in its general standing, as well as its popularity (Stinson). It is the most visible genre in the broader literary culture in terms of book reviews, shelf space in independent bookstores, and best seller lists at the major book retailers (Driscoll et al. 218).

Initially, it was rural noir that drew our attention (“Malleeish” blockbuster works such as the aforementioned *The Dry* and *Scrublands*), but we were also introduced to Sue Williams’s books and drawn to the very place-based nature of these works, including real towns and identifiable geographies that we knew from our travels around the region. We held two reading events focused on Williams’s work, one in May 2022 at the local pub in the tiny town of Sea Lake, Victoria (population 640), and the other at the Renmark library in South Australia, an adjacent agricultural region and a larger regional centre (population 4600).⁴ Readers were sent copies of Williams’s books ahead of time in the case of the Sea Lake event, and copies were made available via the library at the latter event. Pre-reading was not a prerequisite though, as Sue did two readings from *Murder with the Lot* and *Live and Let Fry* to engage the audience, and this enabled a discussion of crime fiction in general, interlaced with specific references to Williams’s own work. In common with many reading events in Australia such as literary festivals, most participants were over 50 and female-identifying, with a minority of male participants.

The significance of place in Australian rural crime fiction made it a particularly apt genre to explore in our project. Almost 30 years ago, literary crime scholar Stephen Knight argued that Australian crime fiction was curiously characterised by a *lack* of place attentiveness, often unlocated and with place given “no emotive or agentive part in the story” (44). This was matched, he continued, by an opposite tendency to write the land as an excessive, hostile agent with an outside, touristic eye in mind. In this reading, Australian crime fiction occupies an ambivalent relationship to place that ultimately defuses its specificity, and the significance of geography and its attendant cultures. Redhead later affirmed Knight’s position and writes of this tendency to generic or indeterminate place—which she identifies as especially pertinent in rural crime fiction—that “locations are renamed and thus disguised, set overseas, or take place with no reference to any concrete locale . . . [thus] rendered anonymous” (13). The rise in popularity of Australian rural crime fiction internationally suggests otherwise, with the Australian landscape recognised as an important factor in the subgenre’s appeal. Jane Harper’s US editor speaks directly to this point when asked about the author’s success in that market: “Almost everyone mentions Jane’s settings first . . . And I too fell for the way she makes the landscapes where her books take place serve almost as characters in the book” (Picker 48).

In line with this, we think that much Australian rural crime fiction, both rural noir and cosy crime, centres place through recognisable—if sometimes also generalisable—geographies. This may be done through geographic features: a large river system for example, which locates the works in the Murray Darling Basin, or an exceptionally dry agricultural environment, which orients to the famed “Goyder’s Line” that marks the boundary of arable and grazing regions in South Australia. A main street full of empty shop fronts references many towns that readers may know, or have passed through or seen represented. Place can also be rendered through explicit naming—for instance, Kovacic’s *The Shifting Landscape* makes real places and their histories a critical part of the narrative—or by the use of toponyms which consciously reference identifiable aspects of rural and regional Australia. Sue Williams’s Rusty Bore series uses a mix of real and imagined place names which, she explains, is an intentional strategy that navigates a line between critical commentary and offense:

A lot of writers have said that's because they didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings . . . I think they are like me, and they are lily-livered and they don't want outrage, sending them hate mail. There does seem to be a tradition of making up names [in Australian crime fiction] but also I just felt like it was a fun thing to do.⁵
(Renmark discussion)

After discovering that participants at the Sea Lake reading event like their towns to be named—one participant commented: “I think it would be an honour to have your town name in the book”—Williams joked that she would go away and tell other crime writers that they don't have to make up names anymore.

Fabricated names do not necessarily indicate a denial of place, as our discussions of Williams's work with readers affirmed. For instance, the made up (and deliberately silly) “Sheep Dip” and “Rusty Bore” prompted one former Mallee farmer, who was based west of Moorook, to speak at length about his experiences:

We have our own Rusty Bore. When the farmers first started, they had a bore—by the time we bought it, the bore had broken down, or windmill had broken down or something, when we started getting river water coming past. Like I mentioned before—the sheep dip—you never forget the sheep dip once you've been dipping sheep—just a couple of things you said, I thought, “Yeah, that could be on our farm” [laughs].

Another reader reminisced about a lone sheep named Dot that used to walk down the main street of Nyah West and an elderly driver in Sea Lake who always used to reverse her car without looking, with a cloud of cigarette smoke emanating from her. Everyone adjusted to this eccentricity, avoiding an accident until she ran into a post on one of the shops and smashed it.

This variety of “local colour” features throughout the Rusty Bore Mysteries series. Names such as Hustle, Muddy Soak, and Sheep Dip—while whimsical, are no less ludicrous than colonial names such as Swan Hill, imposed upon the original Wemba Wemba Wati Wati name “Boora Boora”), and reference colonial visions and misplaced narratives that are then humorously opened up to reflection and critique. As Ian D. Clark has observed, in Australia “the place namescape is palimpsestic” and “the mixture of toponyms reflects the sequence of occupation” (“A Ramble”).

The significance of place is further emphasised through Cass Tuplin, the central protagonist of Williams's series, whose embeddedness in her local community is characteristic of the cosy subgenre. A key distinction between rural noir and cosy crime is the positionality of the investigator: rural noir detectives are commonly outsiders to the place and community that they enter. Sometimes the detecting figure has been a resident of the place in the past, as with Aaron Falk in *The Dry*—but they need to be apprised of the present conditions of the town they left long ago, and they maintain an ambivalent relationship with the place. The amateur investigators in cosy crime fiction are generally residents, and their sleuthing power derives from local knowledge, gleaned through relationships. Across both subgenres, relationships with place are critical to the plot and to the detecting protagonists. As Garry Disher points out:

[R]ural noir detectives are obliged to make sense of their surroundings as they make sense of a crime, resulting in a dynamic interrelationship between investigator and place . . . These characters fit uncomfortably in their challenging landscapes.” (“Twisted”).

By contrast, the cosy crime protagonist's perspective on place is immersive, already "caught up" with the crucial dynamics of the setting.

Eco-Crime and the Cosy

In the Rusty Bore Mysteries series, Cass's role as fish and chip shop owner offers access to virtually all of the town of 147 inhabitants, and her local knowledge and networks are critical to her investigations. Meanwhile, Cass's eldest son Dean, representing official law and order, is literal-minded and officious, mocking the vernacular insights that inform his mother's (more successful) sleuthing. In the fourth book in the series, Dean takes leave and assists her with detecting but can't ever seem to turn off his "police radar." Cass's relationships with her two very different sons, as well as the neighbours and customers with whom she interacts daily, are a central means through which Williams explores different dynamics of regional life and opens up nuanced commentary within the constraints of cosy conventions. This commentary is enabled by the local and relational aspects of Cass's life, which lend themselves to noticing and navigating differences, and to recognising the complexity of finding consensus in a small community. Cass is a constant presence in Rusty Bore, serving customers and interacting with her community, and she can talk to all different kinds of people, without alienating or excluding. This is contrasted with her second son, Brad, a passionate environmentalist who lectures his mother and generally puts people offside with his strident remarks.

This connects into one of the most significant aspects of the Rusty Bore Mysteries series for our discussion—its attention to eco-crime. Despite Williams's humour and the playfulness of the text as it draws attention to the strange legacies of settler colonialism and the idiosyncrasies of rural town life, she does not make light of the pervasive environmental violence that exists. The hallmark of "the golden age" of cosy crime (associated with Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey) offered comfort to readers after the horrors of the First World War, and an "escape from the realism of everyday life" (Worsley 228). The solving of the mystery, the arrest of the murderer, and the restoration of order to small town life is a conventional expectation of the cosy, and speaks to its popularity at times of heightened social crisis: most recently with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns (Krawczyk-Żywko 13). The eco-crime dimensions of Williams's novels prevent reassuring resolutions. With climate crisis remaining an unresolved urgency beyond the last page, we are left with an unsettling conclusion, despite the closure of each murder narrative. Sleuthing can expose the power and corruption that lie behind environmental violence, but one detective operating alone cannot make everything right.

From this perspective, the rural setting of the Rusty Bore Mysteries becomes meaningful beyond cosy convention. Since colonisation, regional and rural Australia have been endlessly subject to extraction—for mining, for pastoralism, for agriculture—and they are on the frontline of the unfolding climate crisis (Hughes et al.). Australia's first climate change refugees were declared in 2009 in the Victorian Mallee (Ker). Rusty Bore is far from a rural idyll unsettled by a one-off crime. Eco-crime is endemic and ongoing. It is located, but also emblematic, as it echoes circumstances experienced across regional Australia, including the intersections of historical dispossession, the slow violence of agricultural colonisation, and related economic and social stress.

This represents a break from earlier tendencies in settler colonial crime fiction, to project horror and fear onto the non-human world, a break that—as indicated earlier—has also been made by contemporary rural noir. In these texts, along with Williams's, external malevolence is

resolutely human in origin, connected to settler colonial histories and the ongoing structural violence of extractive capitalism. When Turnbull refers to Hammer's *Scrublands* as offering "an ethnography of a dying town," "the epic novel about rural life in Australia that we need right now" (*Scrublands* Review), this is not because the town is "naturally" dying, due to time moving on or the rhythms of water scarcity. It is because of deliberate structural interventions that Williams has an interest in exposing.

In our book discussions, Williams reflected on her interest in writing regional Australia outside a supernatural tradition where it is the land itself that is the source of horror:

I'm not sure if it's because we have Henry Lawson way back with his perspective on country life; [the 1961 novel] *Wake in Fright*—that's a pretty ghastly depiction . . . My own experience of growing up in country Australia—in South Gippsland on a dairy farm [in the south-east of Victoria]—was not like that. My Mum was a schoolteacher and every night she'd be regaling us with funny stories of characters in the town. (Sea Lake discussion)

Williams's use of humour and a kind of slapstick mode of relation between her characters enables a playful, but also a more nuanced depiction of rural place through which serious themes can be addressed. Cass's interactions with her younger son Brad bring themes of climate crisis and environmental violence to the fore, and this was a point of interest in the reader discussions. In *Dead Men Don't Order Flake*, the plot of which centres around the Mallee's thwarted potential to be a major hub of solar and wind generation, Brad tries to tell Cass about fracking licences in the Murray Darling Basin, granted by the state government to "Gas Solutions." Cass's neighbour and fellow business owner Vern surmises darkly that Gas Solutions will "make squillions," while the locals will have to live with "poisoned groundwater and messed up farmland" (146).

Williams wryly highlights what the *Saturday Paper* reviewer describes as "the absurdity of environmental politics in regional areas" (S.R.), where local infighting and NIMBY responses distract from structural questions of large scale environmental exploitation that are embedded into the economic, social and political organisation of the nation, played out in local ways in regional Australia: "A character complains that solar panels give his goats headaches, recalling the [furore] over orange-bellied parrots and wind turbines in Gippsland some years ago" (S.R.).⁶

Brad has passion but doesn't know how to communicate it effectively to the wider community and doesn't build coalitions. His lone wolf status won't get him anywhere, Cass knows, and this is something that the Sea Lake readers (a small town not unlike Rusty Bore) pointed out. Cass makes the mistake of recommending to Brad a talk by Dr Eric Buckland at nearby Muddy Soak, thinking it could help Brad with his university project about oceans, not realising Buckland is a climate denier. Brad rails against Buckland and his supporters: "The whole thing makes me so angry, Mum. You know, anyone who donated money to the book . . . they're all connected to the fossil-fuel industry. . . . Bunch of selfish profiteering bastards" (*Dead Men* 151–52). Here, the Mallee is represented as a territory ripe for further exploitation—beyond pillaging in the name of agriculture—by fossil fuel companies and fraudsters. Cass acknowledges that this is the case, but responds pragmatically: "Look, son, I appreciate your input, but we all need to face up to the fact that not everyone's entire existence revolves around the state of the environment." Brad rails in return: "Well, it bloody should. . . . It's pretty lonely knowing the planet's going down the plughole and no one gives a shit" (*Dead Men* 181).

Cass tries to counsel Brad against positioning himself in opposition to his community—as a woman in a small rural town, she knows how critical local relationships are to keeping everything going: “Brad, it doesn’t help anyone when you start up on the whole *I’m-the-only-environmental-crusader-in-town* routine. Plenty of people agree with you” (*Dead Men* 182). This speaks to Williams’s acknowledgement that regional people have different pressures and demands on them, with climate crisis sometimes figuring low on their list of priorities given the lack of essential services available to support many aspects of life—including a lack of local police capacity, which makes Cass’s detective work all the more necessary. Brad’s earnest, uncompromising attitude can be alienating to people living marginal lives in Rusty Bore. Cass tries to keep everyone onside—except the bad actors—speaking across political divisions, appealing to her fellow residents’ shared investment in their place.

When Brad fakes a press release saying that all Australian super funds had decided to dump their investments in fossil fuels—based on the true case of Jonathan Moylan (Hall)—Cass realises this might be seen as a crime with serious consequences. This adds to the complexity of “crime” that occurs across the text, from corporate and structural crimes that enact environmental violence, to the state acting against environmental activists (which has ramped up in recent years), to the murder of an environmentalist who died in a suspicious car crash after revealing secrets of the shady “Ignition Group.”

Cass’s response to Brad’s “enviro-briefings” (146) is also a symptom of the many demands on her, including her work at the fish and chip shop, looking out for her neighbours, and crime solving, and allows his voice to be tempered as a didactic force in the text. This was something raised in our reading events, and the following exchange between a reader in Sea Lake and Sue Williams shows what they were thinking about the character of Brad and what he represents: an advocate for urgent climate action in a region notable for its conservative politics, like much of rural Australia (Whitehouse; Hinkson):

Reader: You made Brad too gentle I think.

SW: You think so? You think he could be a bit more full-on?

Reader: Perhaps that’s the way it is . . . not totally believed or taken seriously.

SW: What do you think I could do with Brad though? Maybe you could write it?

Reader: I think he’s a good character because he’s pretty much opposite of his brother Dean—they were poles apart weren’t they really? And I liked that.

(Sea Lake discussion)

The readers in Sea Lake noted that Williams was channelling her own anger about climate inaction through Brad, as she was quite open about her frustration with government inaction, and her ambivalence about regional life. Despite the “cosy” moniker, Williams is far from sentimental about the Mallee, and she connects its current precarious conditions directly to a history of agricultural exploitation. Her most recent novel—#4 in the series—*Death at the Belvedere*—offers this descriptor of Rusty Bore:

I drove through town, past the closed hardware shop, its dusty windows covered in graffiti. Past the closed pub, the op shop and demolition site that was once our town hall. I slowed down by the silos, a picturesque row of three, and took the turn into the highway heading south. The weathered yellow sign flashed by: Rusty Bore—Original home of the Mallee arm Days. (It used to say Mallee Farm Days, until some

joker shot out the F.) Vern likes to argue that the sign is a heritage feature for our town, but I'd rather look to the future, always assuming we have one. (107)

The sign alludes to a Mallee that is long gone, at least in Rusty Bore, and to its precarious future, underscored by crimes that are not always registered and that lie behind some of the campier signifiers of the cosy genre (such as the woman wearing a gold lamé knit dress, found dead on a salt pan in *Live and Let Fry*⁷). Of course, if you are open to seeing it, evidence of climate crime is everywhere, including corrupt companies and their murderous greenwashing strategies.⁸ The fictional line of the cosy, and the bumbling humour of the solo environmentalist and his amateur fish and chip shop owning detective mother, allow readers to engage in these conversations through the filter of a less confronting world. As one Renmark reader put it: "I enjoyed this because it's light enough. I don't have to have all the gory details . . . violence puts me right off." A Sea Lake reader also commented:

There's a difference too, between the gory crime and mystery murders. I think the mystery murders are more intriguing to me—yes there's a death but it's working out why they died, how they died rather than focusing on all the details.

The "why" here is not necessarily confined to the pages of the book and can be connected back to foundational issues of capitalist crime and exploitation in settler colonial Australia.

When asked by a Renmark reader about the murders she invents, Williams replied: "I made this decision early on that victims have to be non-locals because we've only got 147 locals. If a stranger arrives at the beginning of the story, you know that they are probably gone." The relatively small number of inhabitants, already affected by depopulation, would be further eroded by murders of locals. This wry response also acknowledges some of the significant challenges that rural and regional Australia face, as temperatures rise, places become unliveable, and livelihoods diminish. Acknowledging the Mallee as a site of historic and current crime in her cosy series, Williams also affirms its possible futures that have not been closed down yet.

Conclusion

Our reading events—situated in places that connect geographically, historically and culturally with the locations of the Rusty Bore Mysteries series—focused on the role of place in Williams's novels. Williams's use of humour, in contrast to the grimness of noir, allowed readers to reflect on the living complexity of their communities, particularly the eccentric characters and low-level criminal activities that provided them with stories and anecdotes, and which connect into larger, structural crimes that impact regional and rural Australia.

Although the driver for each subgenre comes from the same place, cosies are feminised by the presence of cats, tea, gossip and food whereas noir is masculinised, featuring male detectives, frontierism, political ideas and seemingly impossible quests. In contrast to noir, cosy crime fiction is known for its contained setting in a small town or domestic context, where the most violent actions are not depicted directly. Like Cass, their detective protagonists are usually amateurs and are an integral part of the community, drawing on their local knowledge to solve their cases. These elements of the local, the familiar, and indirect depiction of horror, all of which give rise to the cosy moniker, contrast with what we see as the more prominent strand of rural crime fiction at this time, "rural noir."

Whereas these subgenres of crime fiction are generally placed at opposing ends of the crime spectrum, there are notable overlaps between the two in their capacity to comment on broader historical, social and environmental crimes. Discussions with readers, coupled with our own reading of Williams's texts, have illuminated links between the postcolonial consciousness of eco-crime evinced in rural noir and the environmental themes that Williams's texts also explore. We suggest that despite its reputation for retreat and comfort, cosy crime can surprise with a direct engagement with discomfiting realities beyond the text. The criminal activities that Cass Tuplin investigates are not registered anywhere in the landscape (except in the form of dead bodies), yet the Mallee and her books are redolent with evidence of environmental crime, with its roots in 230 years of colonisation. Together, these subgenres contribute to the flourishing of regional Australian literature, with a special attunement to the uncomfortable process of reckoning with Australia's violent, extractive past and present.

The cosy subgenre may be easily feminised and belittled, yet it can elicit knowledge about regional places and operate as a site for political/critical commentary. The Mallee landmarks, both real and imagined, that feature in Williams's books allow for an expansive, wide-ranging conversation about the reader's own experience of place, mediated by the humour and conventions of "the cosy." To conclude, it is not only rural noir that has an interest in foregrounding environmental and colonial violence, and Williams's cosy crime Rusty Bore Mysteries series is a case in point. The obscuring of "incendiary subject matter" (Masterclass) can intensify these texts' effects. The strength of crime fiction in the field of regional Australian literature derives precisely from its grounding in material, atmospheric and historical referents that orient the reader towards regions and environments that connect to their own experience.

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NOTES

¹ In the Rusty Bore Mysteries series, Williams chooses to replace cats with ferrets because she is concerned by the damage feral cats do in killing native wildlife.

² Other Australian examples include The Tea Ladies series by Amanda Hampton and Lainie Anderson's The Petticoat Police Mystery series—both highly place-based, although in historic urban settings—Hampton's in inner Sydney in the "swinging sixties," and Anderson's in Adelaide during World War I.

³ Elizabeth Webby notes that there was a distrust of fiction by Mechanics Institutes because novels were seen as "tempting" and "time-wasting" for the "fairer sex," even though novels had to be included in their libraries to attract subscribers (127–29).

⁴ Renmark shares aspects of its origin story with Mildura, the largest town in the Victorian Mallee, as both were "founded" as agricultural colonies by the Canadian Chaffey brothers.

⁵ Williams playfully embeds history within her cosy camp narrative through names such as the *Muddy Soak Cultivator*, which mirrors the real *Mildura Cultivator*, a prominent periodical in print from 1888–1920.

⁶ A similar battle is currently being played out over a wind farm on Robbins Island in Tasmania, which may pose a threat to the migration of orange-bellied parrots (Pridham and Powell).

⁷ This over-the-top image references the glamorously dressed corpse found in Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library* (1942).

⁸ The Mallee Energy Hub is now located 16 km northeast of Buronga, on the traditional lands of the Paakantji (Barkandji), Latji Latji, Muthi Muthi, and Yitha Yitha peoples.

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