

Savage satire of lit crit world cuts deep

WORDS KATHARINE ENGLAND

In a lifetime of reading and reviewing I've never met a scenario quite this close to the bone. David Free is a NSW literary critic and novelist and his first psychological thriller is a raging satire on the modern book industry – a mad nightmare of talentless literary ambition liberally laced with money, sex and murder.

Free's lit crit alter ego is Raymond Saint, the most hated reviewer in Australia, a man who smashed himself up in childhood by hurtling face-first off a garage roof and now divides his days between chronic pain, bourbon and book reviewing. Sitting hurts, so he writes on his feet – "like Hemingway, like Nabokov, like Philip Roth ..." and when a pretty dark-eyed publicist comes to his door with a wickedly tempting proposition it's the Hemingway connection that ignites the attraction, that and her professed admiration for his reviews.

Less enamoured of Saint's trenchant critiques are his tanned and trendy editor and the lazily sycophantic reviewing rival he refers to as an "industry lapdog" but these will soon be the least of his worries: the little publicist is found dead and he is accused of murdering her. Given the pain, the pills, the bourbon and the resulting confusion, he can't be absolutely certain that he didn't.

The bodies pile up and so do the Miles-worthy manuscripts. Not for nothing are the references to Ern Malley as Free quite savagely lampoons the industry in prose Clive James has compared to that of a neurotic angel. The medium is deliberately and suspensefully sensational but there is much that rings plangently true, not only on the disproportionate power of the publicist but in Saint's rueful riff on his book-reviewing life: "You should have fucked more and read less ... You put your head down and wrote things for people you didn't know ... You put the world on hold and it hung up on you. And the other people never read your stuff anyway."

Mark Brandi's award-winning debut is a more regular crime novel but written with great delicacy and deliberate restraint; the reader must fill in the gaps its reticent young characters shy away from.

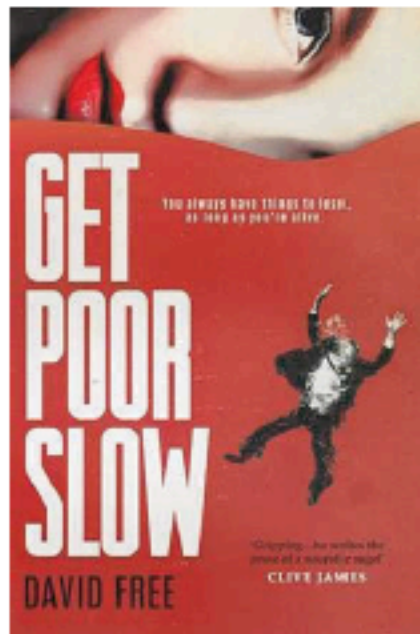
In the long, hot, country-town summer of 1989 best friends Ben and Fab learn that their classmate Daisy has hanged herself from the family's Hills hoist but it is not something they easily discuss. Nor is the man who

moves into the girl's old house, who has Ben around to do odd jobs and takes them yabbing in the dam – sometimes both of them, more often Ben on his own. And nor are the Nike Air Maxes that both have long coveted and that the new neighbour has supplied to Ben on a time-payment plan to be redeemed by work around the house.

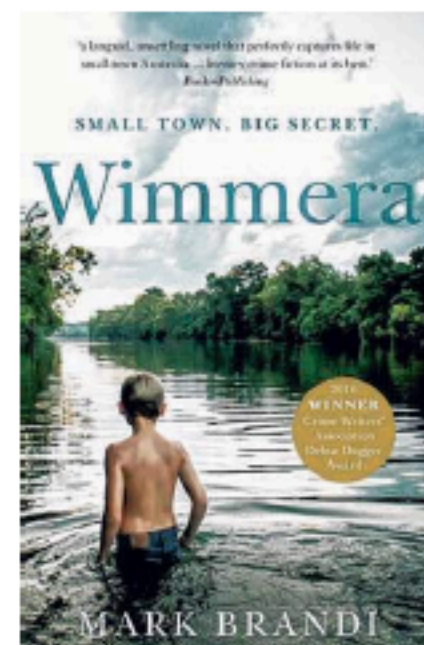
The first part of the novel is focused

through Ben as the two boys navigate the last year of primary school; the second takes up Fab's story some 16 years on when he has lost contact with Ben and is flailing around for a direction in life, but flashes back to key episodes in that formative year. Quietly central is an oddly tender description of the hunting and skinning of a rabbit that will

have vital echoes in the book's climax, and the gift of the rabbit's foot – the only thing Fab's punitive father ever gave him. The third section, which brings all the silences together around a police investigation and a trial, is full of painful ironies handled with all the delicate elision that is the hallmark of this unexpectedly heart-tugging thriller.



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