

The tagline of *Wimmera* is 'Small town. Big secret'. Mark Brandi's first novel does indeed feature a secret (and a grim one, at that), but it also offers a disturbing insight into Australian masculinity. The book opens in the country circa 1989. Ben and Fab are primary school students who, both misfits, while away the hours catching yabbies, playing cricket, and watching *The Wonder Years*. Fab's father is abusive, but they find solace in their friendship. Then Ronnie Bellamy appears in their lives. Ronnie is a 'tall, muscular' man who works in the nearby mines. He charms the boys with his friendly demeanour and stash of porn magazines, but he has ulterior motives. Fast-forward to 2006: Fab remains in his childhood town, working menial jobs and drinking excessively. He seems reluctant to confront his past, though a gruesome discovery forces him to do just that.

Brandi does a brilliant job of bringing to life the world in which Ben and Fab came of age. This world is tightly knit, with an overwhelming stench of racism and machismo. Ronnie's grooming of Ben, and the impact of sexual abuse on the boys, is depicted in a manner that is both subtle and devastating. The novel crackles with suspense and dread.

Thematically, *Wimmera* has something in common with American novels such as *Sleepers* and *Mysterious Flesh* (both of which have been transformed into films). Fortunately, Brandi's novel is not derivative. With the exception of a brief dream sequence, the text is devoid of clichés. The character development is mostly strong, though I felt that readers could have learned more about some of the minor characters (particularly Fab's friend Afriki).

*Wimmera* won the CWA (British Crime Writers' Association) Début Dagger Award for an unpublished manuscript. This reviewer looks forward to reading more of Brandi's fiction.