

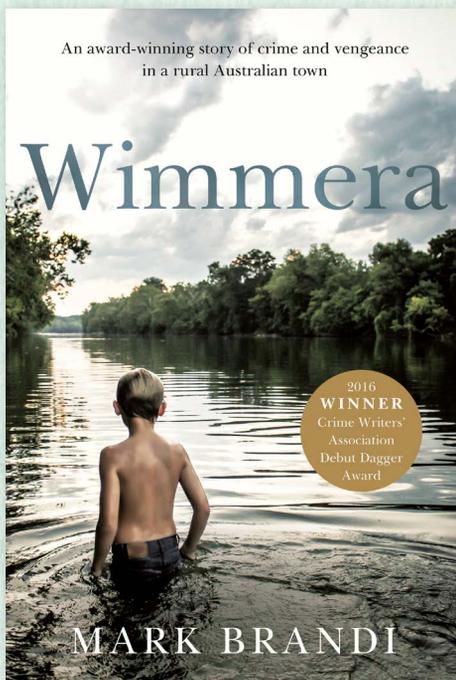


Mark Brandi's **Wimmera** raked in several accolades before even being published, including the UK Crime Writers' Association Debut Dagger.

Set in a rural Australian town, the story follows two best friends, Ben and Fab, who are about to start high school. Over the holidays, a girl was found hanged from a clothesline, and another group of boys find a garbage bin tossed into the river with its lid nailed shut. A strange, huge man moves into the house where the girl died. The boys try to distract themselves from the weird events

by yabbing and playing cricket - but it's impossible to ignore the sinister undercurrent running through the town. We asked Mark, who used to work in Victoria's Department of Justice, about how **Wimmera** came to be.

# Small-town secrets



■ **Your decision to take writing seriously was triggered by a bike accident, in which you were struck down by a car. How did that lead you to becoming a published author?**

The accident was life changing. The driver fled the scene, and I was left on the road with broken ribs and a bugged shoulder. Still,

give or take a split second either way, it could have been much worse.

I was already making progress on **Wimmera**, but the accident made me realise just how short life can be. And it was during a painful recovery from two shoulder operations that I decided to leave my career and pursue writing more seriously; I needed to give it the energy and focus it deserved.

It probably would have been completed if the accident

hadn't happened, but perhaps I'd still be working on it.

■ **What memories do you have from growing up in a pub in rural Victoria? Did any of these memories make their way in to *Wimmera*?**

Pubs in country towns can be great equalisers: on any given night you might find the local mayor, an off-duty copper and a hardened crook standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the bar. As a result, I came to know people from all walks of life. And while it was never by design, I now see how some of those characters influenced those on the page.

The pub also offered accommodation, and often there were long-term residents who worked at the local goldmine. They were typically hard-drinking loners from out of town, and I found them both intriguing and intimidating. Looking back, I can see how the character of Ronnie may have his roots there.

■ **Other than the fact that you grew up in a similar setting, what made you want to write a novel set in a rural town?**

The setting wasn't a deliberate decision. Much of my writing – both short and longer form – tends to be based in rural Australia. Clearly, despite having left the country for city life at 18, the experience has left a deep impression.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the rush of rumour and gossip, sinister occurrences in country towns are often distorted, unexplained or deliberately forgotten. I guess that was one of the concerns I was interested in exploring – the way such events can be quickly normalised or glossed over.

But there's also great freedom in country life, particularly as a child. The summer holidays can seem endless, in which possibilities are limited only by your imagination. I hope that sense of optimism also comes through in **Wimmera**.

■ **Which parts of Jack London's story 'To Build a Fire' inspired the original short story that *Wimmera* is based on?**

'To Build a Fire' is often regarded as a classic human versus nature tale, in which the

protagonist is doomed by his bravado. But the writing – simple, restrained and rhythmic – awakened something in my own work. I also loved the graceful – but powerful – way the story alternates the point of view between the man and the dog.

In a writing class, after an initial reading of 'To Build a Fire', we were asked to draft a piece inspired by the natural world. In response, I wrote a short story titled 'To Skin a Rabbit'. It features a young boy on a hunting trip with his father, in which he faces his first encounter with the casual brutality of country life.

That story (featuring Fab and his father) quietly gnawed away at me, and I knew those characters had much more to tell.

■ **What drew you to pursue a career in criminal justice?**

Crime often evokes something primal. Sometimes it's a need to understand what makes some people do such terrible things. In other cases there's a vengeful desire to see people punished. It's such a richly complex and dynamic area, with so many social, institutional and psychological dimensions to explore.

My three older brothers also work in law enforcement, so all their war stories might have had something to do with it.

■ **With your employment history and three brothers in the police, were any of the crime elements of *Wimmera* based on a specific case?**

Such was my morbid fascination with all things criminal that one of my brothers would give me his old *Australian Police Journal* magazines. They contained fascinating – and often quite gory – stories of criminal investigations, usually written by the officers directly involved.

There was one particular case, which included a critical oversight by the suspects in a long-unsolved murder investigation. This seemingly minor error would eventually lead police to their door, and it also became an important detail in **Wimmera**. 

**Wimmera by Mark Brandi is published by Hachette, rrp \$29.99.**