

# My verdict? It's a cracker

Perth-based lawyer Tom Percy, who has played a leading role in the Susan Neill-Fraser case, has turned out a riveting debut novel.

Review GREG BARNES

**T**om Percy is not the first lawyer to find some inspiration for a novel in the richly diverse world of legal practice. English barrister John Mortimer famously did with his brilliant Rumpole of the Bailey series some three decades ago.

Percy (pictured), a Perth-based QC, who has played a leading role acting for Sue Neill-Fraser as she seeks to overturn her murder conviction, has turned out a cracker debut novel set in the West.

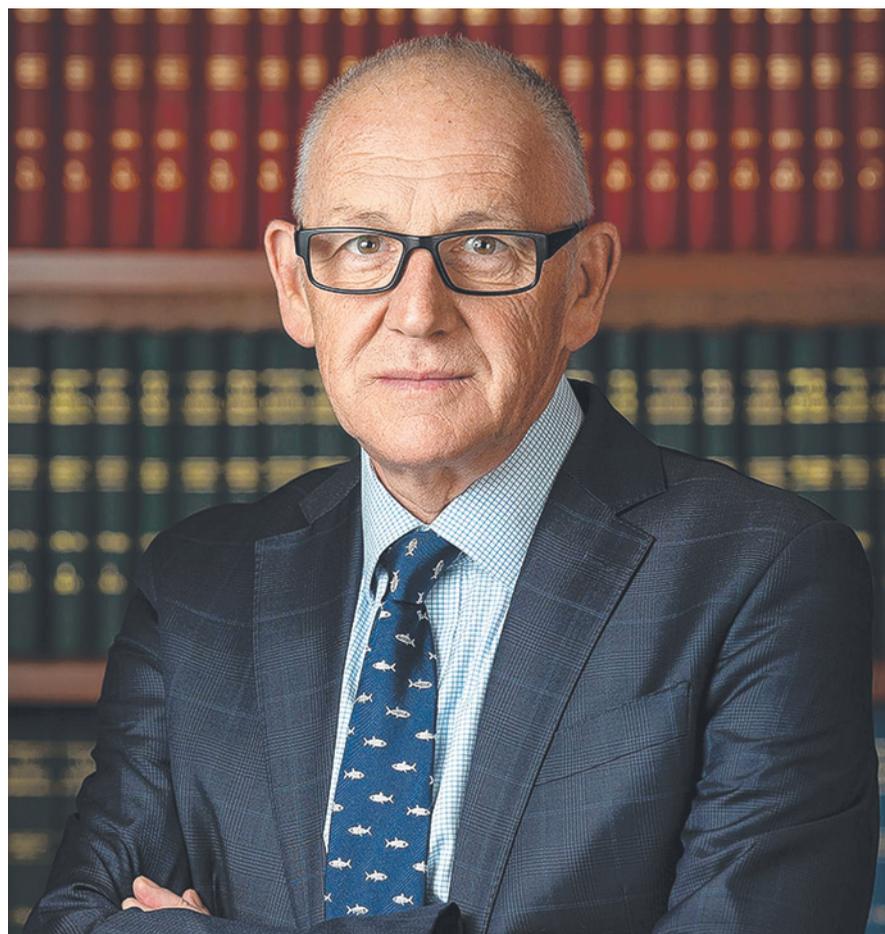
Western Australia is the home of the mining industry in this country and, over many years, Perth's main business strip, St Georges Tce, or "the Terrace" as it's commonly known, is a colourful mixture of entrepreneurs, lawyers and media types all feeding off each other and having a punt on stocks and horses. Tom Percy describes this scene with aplomb in *The Curate's Egg*.

The story revolves around Declan McKenna, a 35-year-old mining analyst who finds himself entranced by, as it turns out, a rather intriguing, to put it neutrally, finance reporter Catherine deVaux. An encounter between them in Sydney, where McKenna was the guest of Franco Montagne, an accountant and, more importantly, a promoter of fledging mineral exploration companies, proves life-changing for the relatively naive McKenna and his girlfriend, Andrea, back in Perth.

McKenna finds himself in the criminal justice system facing charges relating to Montagne's float and Percy, having been around the legal world for some years now, paints accurately the court process and the diversity of lawyers one finds at the criminal bar.

From the sleek and fastidious in million-dollar chambers to the chaotic but deceptively smart one-person operator, and the slow turning wheels of justice.

The world of white-collar crime, as corporate fraud is termed, is actually not that different to the blue-collar variety



most of us associate with the word "crime". Far from being an easy ride, for anyone, whether they be charged with insider trading or armed robbery, the criminal justice process is brutal.

While Percy writes with an eye to exploring the larger-than-life personas of the WA corporate and legal scene, his narrative reflects on the age-old theme of "all that glitters is not gold" and the salutary life lesson that goes with understanding what really matters in life.

*The Curate's Egg* moves at a cracking pace, rather like a film that flashes from scene to scene. It flows neatly but in no way predictably as McKenna's life unravels, with the elements of his personal and business lives colliding and collapsing.

There are plenty of references to familiar Perth and Sydney landmarks, not Fremantle or the Harbour Bridge, but

famous watering holes and restaurants such as Doyles in Sydney and the Blue Duck cafe at North Cottesloe, where Alan Bond used to hold court.

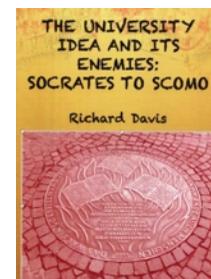
Another Tasmanian link to Percy's first novel is that Supreme Court acting judge Shane Marshall has written the foreword.

The law – well, the human side of it, at least – makes for rich pickings for a novelist and Tom Percy's *The Curate's Egg* is a fine example of how to paint that picture.

*The Curate's Egg*, by Tom Percy, (Halstead Press), \$29.95, is out now.



**Nonfiction**  
*The Idea of the University and its Enemies: Socrates to ScoMo*  
Richard Davis  
Sassafras Books, \$20, out now and available from the Hobart Bookshop



Professor Richard Davis' book sounds a warning on the state of universities, not only in Australia.

Davis, quoting Cardinal Newman, makes the distinction of the ideal of education as a public service aimed at national betterment replaced by the proposition of education as an income producing commodity to be sold in the market.

These last changes are illustrated by those that have shaped the University of Tasmania. In 1954, Sydney Sparkes Orr, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania, wrote to the Mercury calling for an inquiry into the university including staff conditions and salaries and the power of University Council to overrule the Professorial Board on academic issues such as the lowering of academic standards such as the lowering of matriculation standards. A 1955 Tasmanian government inquiry gave the University of Tasmania the most protective tenure in Australia.

The Dawkins revolution, in the shape of the Higher Education: A Policy Discussion Paper 1987 mapped out an emphasis on educational preparation required for entry into well-established professions giving little encouragement to the Humanities or Social Sciences. Academics were to be made more efficient and productive and a top-down managerial system replace time wasting committees. Trained administrators would be substituted for elected officials, such as deans.

In 1989, the Hawke-Keating government introduced fee paying for tertiary students ending the free system set up by former prime minister Gough Whitlam.

Davis expresses opposition to the proposed move by the University to the Hobart CBD concluding that the University of Tasmania, like many others now, is run by the Vice Chancellor and administration and that "the enemies of the university idea appear to have totally triumphed".

– JOHN LIVERMORE  
John Livermore is a former University of Tasmania Commercial Law lecturer and Dean Faculty of Economic and Commerce.



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