

CRIME FICTION

Book review: Force of Nature by Jane Harper

A woman vanishes in the bush in the impressive second novel from the author of *The Dry*. Review by Joan Smith



Hostile: the forest is as alien as anything in a fairy tale

ALAMY

The Sunday Times, January 28 2018, 12:01am

It is only a year since Jane Harper's first crime novel, *The Dry*, was published in the UK to instant acclaim. The story, of an apparent murder-suicide in an isolated Australian community ravaged by drought, was a reminder of how harsh life can be

outside the country's cosmopolitan cities. It was my Sunday Times book of the month and went on to become a bestseller, winning the CWA Gold Dagger in addition to the awards Harper had already won in Australia.

For her second novel, *Force of Nature*, she has returned to the severe, unforgiving territory of the bush — and it is even more impressive than *The Dry*. Where the first novel presented a landscape desiccated by years without rain, the new book has too much of it, and Harper handles several plot lines with apparently effortless confidence.

It is set in a fictional nature reserve outside Melbourne, popular with executives in search of a corporate bonding experience. Five women set out on a camping trip, but only four of them emerge from the reserve, bruised and traumatised. The fifth woman, Alice Russell, is missing and a huge search begins.

It is a clever twist on the traditional locked-room mystery, set in a forest as alien and hostile as anything in a fairy tale. But it is done in a thoroughly modern manner, with alternating chapters documenting the increasingly frantic search and the women's accident-prone trek. Harper makes it look easy, but she has to pace two narratives without giving too much away, creating an almost unbearable level of suspense.

Her success has taken Australia by storm, all the more so because even hugely popular Australian crime writers, such as Peter Temple, Kathryn Fox and Garry Disher, have struggled to make an impression beyond their home country. So it's ironic that Harper, who is being hailed as the next big thing in Australian crime fiction, isn't even a local.

She was born in Manchester and moved to Melbourne, where she now lives, at the age of eight. Her family returned to England when Harper was a teenager and she trained as a journalist, landing a job in Hull. She didn't return to Australia until 2008, arriving at the Geelong Advertiser at the end of a prolonged drought, where the fire-ravaged landscape planted the seeds of *The Dry*.



On strange ground: Manchester-born Jane Harper explores parts of Australia unfamiliar even to residents

There is a precedent for English authors finding themes and inspiration in Australia. Nevil Shute, the British aeronautical engineer who wrote some of the most quintessential “Australian” novels of the mid-20th century, didn’t move to his adopted country until he was in his early fifties. Many readers formed their impression of the continent through Shute novels such as *A Town Like Alice* and *On the Beach*.

Harper is a more sophisticated writer than Shute, and *Force of Nature* showcases her ear for dialogue, exposing hierarchies of class through speech. It is also more character-driven than *The Dry*, pulling no punches as the veneer of civilised behaviour is stripped from the women, who bicker among themselves as they wander through the dense, dripping trees.

Harper has wisely brought back Aaron Falk, the detective who almost lost his life in *The Dry*, but this time he is involved in an official capacity. In the earlier book, Falk returned to his home town for a funeral and was drawn into an unofficial investigation in an attempt to clear the name of a childhood friend. This time, he has a professional interest in the missing woman, Alice, who has been secretly passing him documents exposing money-laundering at the accountancy firm where she works.

Falk rushes from Melbourne to join the search, gripped by the fear that his investigation has put her in danger. Her fellow-hikers include the CEO's sister, who has everything to lose if the company goes under, and the only clue to Alice's fate is a faint voicemail left on his mobile phone in the early hours of the morning. But it is also clear that the little group was woefully unprepared for the trip.

Harper's work has been compared to that of Garry Disher, whose acclaimed *Bitter Wash Road* (2013) is set in a community not unlike the fictional Kiewarra in *The Dry*. But Harper is enough of an outsider to realise that the Australia she is writing about is unfamiliar even to many Australians, a point underscored by the reaction of her female characters when they have to spend a couple of nights in the bush.

They are descendants of European settlers, cocooned in coastal cities that protect them from the extremes of climate that lie a few miles inland. Nature is a hostile, unpredictable force in both of Harper's novels, but her brilliance lies in making it into a test of horribly fallible human nature.

Little, Brown £12.99 pp380