

If you enjoyed Jane Harper's 'The Dry' then 'Scrublands' will appeal to you as it uses a similarly harsh Western Australia rural setting for a dark murder mystery. Like that novel, the setting, a sparsely populated and isolated town called Riversend, has formed its inhabitants: the good and the bad, their resilience and secrets.

The protagonist here, Martin Scarsden, has an interesting back story. He is still suffering a muted form of PTSD after being locked in the boot of a car for three days whilst reporting from Gaza. As part of his recuperation, his editor sends Martin to Riversend a year on from a mass killing in the town by a charismatic priest, Byron Swift, who also died in the incident.

Martin is given many of the troubled traits that we have seen in maverick but brilliant cops in countless TV series. Hammer, who is a journalist, presents them, however, with conviction and hints at Martin's growing sense about the moral ambiguity involved in his profession. He also happens to be a talented investigative reporter and begins to suspect that Swift has too conveniently been consigned to the role of paedophilic priest who, fearing exposure, goes on a murderous spree. He is prompted to this conclusion by friends of the priest who can't tally the allegations and bloody actions with the man they knew, respected and in many cases loved. It is also clear that not only Swift but many of Riversend's characters have hidden pasts that continue to haunt them.

So far so familiar then. Hammer, however, takes his time to flesh out his characters – they are not just there to enrich the story's sense of mystery and to send us off on speculative imaginings. We begin to understand their shared histories and the way they are moulded to the rhythm of the environment. Martin's thirst for a good story and his increasing sense of his own rootlessness draw him into the struggles of this community, in such beautifully constructed set pieces as when he joins the town's makeshift fire fighters to tackle a ferocious scrubland fire.

It is this expansiveness and depth of character development that have gained critical acclaim for the book; and I appreciate that although my taste for this genre is a more narrowly defined structure with fewer characters and a restricted focus of guilt which isn't quite the case for the denouement, here.

Nevertheless, the story is a gripping throughout and the ending, nuanced and with elements of moral ambiguity, is still properly concluded.

My friend Phil enjoyed 'Firefly' by Henry Porter and it has some of the pace and gathering excitement of that thriller, with elements of 'The Shepherd's Hut' by Tim Winton. It is, ultimately, though a good, intelligent thriller; and as some critics have suggested seems ready made for a six part TV series.