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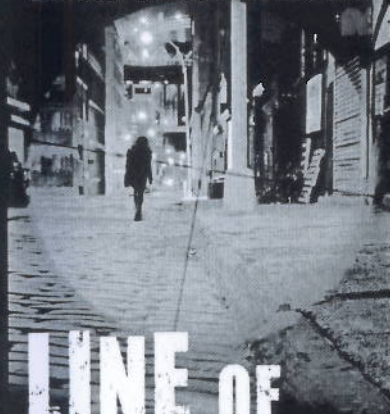
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DAVID WHISH-WILSON



# LINE OF SIGHT

Before Gangland there  
were the scams of the '70s,  
when getting rich  
made life cheap

## RETURN TO THE SCENE: Line of Sight by David Whish- Wilson

**SPOILER ALERT:** RETURN TO THE SCENE functions as a "commentary track" for books, where various creative types choose one of their works and take us behind the scenes in its construction in any manner they see fit. As such, they may spoil plots or details, unearth creative processes you may not want to know about and generally ruin your reading experience if you're not familiar with the work. The aim is, of course, the opposite, so CF advises you pick up the books in question before proceeding.

This is what happens when you write a crime novel based on a real unsolved murder - you get calls at all hours of the day and night. Some are the real deal, but lots of them are from nuts. Last night I was called by a bloke named Les who reckons he knows who killed Shirley Finn. 'Oh yeah?' I ask patiently, watching my goldfish tumble round the tank, huffing on my

e-cigarette. 'Go on.' So Les proceeds to tell me about a bent copper who tricked him out of a gold claim up in the Kimberley, some years back. Les's old HT Holden had broken down on the site of his secret



diggings, and he'd walked for two days across open country back into Fitzroy Crossing, where the helpful local copper had offered to drive him back out with the distributor arm he needed as a spare part. The copper had done precisely that - then driven back at pace and pegged the claim. 'What a prick,' says Les. 'But it didn't do him any good. The arsehole was run over in the main street next day by a fucken road train. Every bastard who crosses me gets killed right after. The spirit who tells me who does the crimes fucken protects me.' I convince Les to buy my book before calling me back. I know he will. This story is like that. It doesn't belong to me, and never has. Every Western Australian of a certain age owns my story - they tell me as much. And they tell me a lot. I get invited to speak a lot at bookshops and libraries and book-clubs

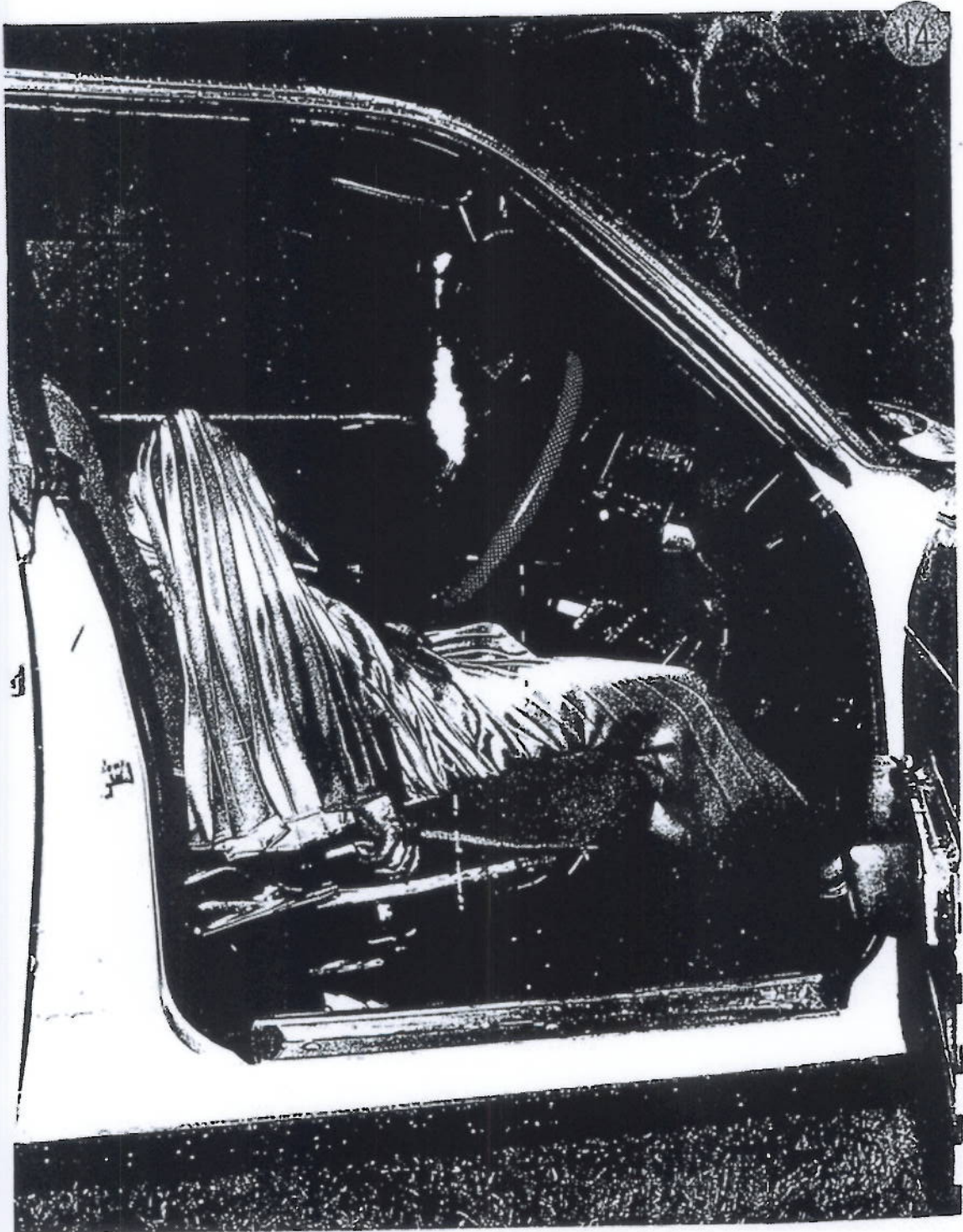
and even Rotary Clubs. Those gigs are the hardest - they start at 7AM. And the coffee is powdered. And I've just quit smoking, again. But they listen, and they nod, and they mutter and nod some more - and they line up to buy the book - because finally, after all these years, some bastard's come along who's crazy enough to put the Shirley Finn murder in a book and call it a novel.

That person is me. Some backstory. The subject of my novel, *Line of Sight*, is the gangland murder of a brothel madam in Perth in 1975. Shirley Finn (my character is called Ruby Devine) was knocked off by bent detectives. At that time, along with a bit of help from the local Sicilian and Calabrian mafia, it was bent cops who ran Perth - the gambling, the vice game, the drugs. Shirley Finn was a tough character and a stubborn woman and

she'd threatened to name the bent D's who weren't helping her pay off a tax debt. She went so far as to stop paying them their weekly bribe. Big mistake. On the night of June 23, 1975, she was lured down to fairway seven of the South Perth Golf Club and shot four times in the head with a sawn off .22. Her body wasn't removed and buried up in the hills, but was instead left out on display. The investigation that followed was rubbish. Witness statements that contradicted the notion that it was all an inexplicable mystery were deliberately not filed. The statements of Shirley's prostitutes were taken down uniformly word perfect by a detective called Don Hancock, who was blown up a few years ago by some local bikies (as an aside, I know a journalist who proved that Perth prostitutes were claiming graft payments to Big Don aka 'The Silver Fox', while

he was still alive, as a tax deduction - but this being Western Australia, the journo was charged with being in possession of private documents - while Big Don went on to become the Chief of the Western Australian CIB.) Friends of Shirley Finn's who had the balls to speak to the media or the Royal Commission afterwards about what everybody knew, but few were crazy enough to say, were bashed or terrified into silence. Pretty soon it was back to business as usual. All investigations in subsequent years into the alleged corrupt activities of certain officers went nowhere (including one which found that the 55 properties owned by three serving detectives had been merely the result of wise investment.) The Minister of Police at the time of Shirley Finn's murder went on to become Premier of Western Australia, before going to jail in the nineties, for





corruption - for demanding a 20,000 dollar bribe from the brother of the then-serving Premier, Brian Burke, who then went to jail for, after another change of government, you guessed it...

I came to the story behind *Line of Sight* when I was working as a creative writing teacher in Casuarina Prison, WA's maximum security facility. I worked in the Special Handling unit and the protective custody unit but mainly with gen-pop prisoners. Most of them, as you'd expect, were lifers. I got to know Shane Finn, who was Shirley Finn's youngest son. He was serving life for the murder of a bloke he'd killed in a knife fight - a bloke who'd taunted him about his mother. Shane had been given the full CIB file on his mother's murder (such as it is) by a sympathetic copper, the first of many who have helped get the novel *Line of Sight* up. By

and large, most coppers I've spoken to are plenty pissed off about Shirley Finn's murder, still angry at the blokes who did it. They reckon that these 'purple circle' coppers promoted one another over the heads of better coppers, knowing that the government of the day and the police union would never have the balls to say anything. That they practiced the time-honoured code of 'just-us' instead of justice. That these blokes called their bentness 'the giggle' for good reason - it made a joke or a game of everything, especially the enforcing of the admittedly stupid prohibitions around gambling, vice and drugs.

So I took the file away and read it through and started showing it around to some people who I could trust. Journo's, prostitutes from the time and some PI's and ex-coppers. They all told me pretty much the same thing. To



**"Essentially,  
life is  
cheap."**

be freakin careful. Because all the blokes concerned were still alive. Because they were all loaded, and living it large (y'know - boats, mansions, rural properties, etc.) And because, essentially, life is cheap. Pointing out other blokes who'd died along the way in mysterious circumstances. Now largely forgotten. It was at this point that I decided to write the story as a work of crime fiction, a genre I've always read and admired but had never worked in. This did the trick, for a number of reasons. Right away it opened doors that were initially closed. For people who are freakin scared, talking on the record is not an option. But to talk to a novelist, who is going to use fiction to get a story across (I've always liked that Flannery

O'Connor quote - 'the truth is not distorted here; rather distortion is used to get at the truth'), to use crime fiction as a way of entertaining but also as a means to get across an alternate, but true history of a place that has always been represented as a city full of cheeky, harmless, odd-ball *Wintonesque* characters - that was the solution to the problems posed by the research, but also by the plotting. It also allowed the blokes who might otherwise feel threatened, to back off. The young fella is, after all, writing a novel (just to give an example, for a while there a 4Corners producer was interested in doing a doco on the Shirley Finn murder, but when he called around his Perth contacts he was told, and I quote 'Forget it. With these blokes you won't even get a tap on the shoulder.' The documentary maker was apologetic, he'd made hard-arsed





investigative docs about colourful Perth businessmen before, but this was one he wasn't prepared to touch. And I understand his withdrawing, of course, because non-fiction doesn't have the same 'deniability' as fiction.) And the truth is that plenty in *Line of Sight* is fictionalised. But plenty isn't. And that's where blokes like Les the mad miner come into the equation. I still take their calls. I still meet them for a beer. Because even

divinely protected blokes like Les the mad miner are a wealth of good stories. When he calls, Les will want to talk about gold, which is funny, because that is the subject of my next Frank Swann novel, set again in Perth, but in 1979. I was asked in a recent interview with a Melbourne radio station what makes crime in WA different to everywhere else. After all, there are bent cops and gangsters in every jurisdiction, human nature and the laws of prohibition being what they are. My answer was our abundant gold. Our history of boom and bust. Our gold mines and gold merchants and gold companies by the hundred. Because if you are making bad money hand over fist – where else are you going to put it? An ex-copper who'd gone into security work recently described to me a meeting he'd observed back in the eighties. Present was an ex-Premier, an ex-CIB Chief,

a couple of shonky lawyers, and two of Northbridge's most powerful mafia figures. What brought them all together in one room, of course, was gold. A shared venture, allegedly. An alchemical venture, you might call it, depending on which perspective you're referring to - to turn a certain white powder or perhaps a dose of political goodwill into the gold stuff. In my version of the meeting the premier is laughing, badly dressed. The mafia dudes are in shirtsleeves, perhaps plaid. There are Sao biscuits on the table, cheese and gherkins. Perhaps some olives. Moselle or Summer Wine. The air is thick with smoke. The copper on the door tries to listen but can't quite hear. They're talking about starting a gold mine, of that much he is sure. He knows that one of the mafia fellas owns a large stake out near Cue. Rumours of a runway out there. Light planes

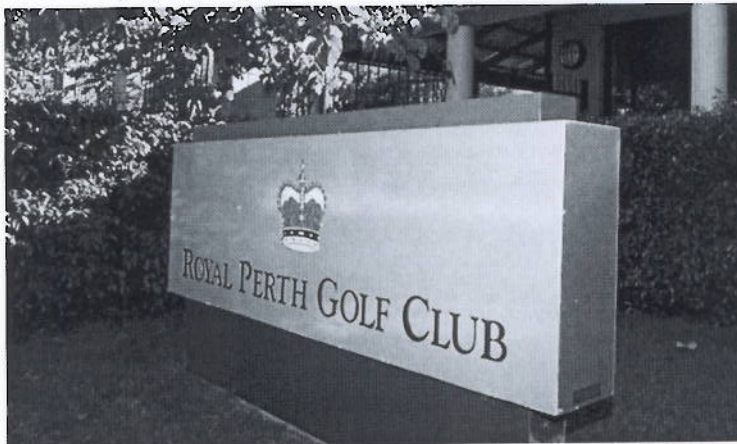
coming and going from SE Asia. Gold country but the gold is all panned out. Never mind. 'There's plenty of gold at the Perth Mint', he overhears the ex-Premier say, before laughing. They notice him listening. The door is shut.

**"Write it as non-fiction and you'll get sued, or shot..."**

It's a potential start to a crime novel, but it isn't fiction, at least, it isn't fictional enough for my purposes. That's my job now, at least as I see it. Having turned a true crime story of a murder committed by police into a work of crime fiction, namely *Line of Sight*, one thing I've learned is that truth and fiction are inseparable. Just like you can read Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* and get a better sense of early 20C Melbourne than in any history book, the way



I see it is that crime fiction is the best vehicle for both entertaining, and exploring a period that can't be represented any other way. Write it as non-fiction and you'll get sued, or shot – if it's any good. Write it as fiction, and if you're doing your job as a writer, you can give your readers the pleasure of wanting to know what happens next, but also give your local readers the added pleasure of trying to work out what is real and what is not, and who is real and who is fictional – you can give a picture of a time and place that is both real and not-real. Fiction is a persuasive medium, and for that reason, for the weirder of us at least, fiction sometimes feels *more* than real – why we



keep sticking our heads into books.

I had a late-night call from someone who'd read my book last month. They called me up to say that they'd dined in one of the restaurants I described in *Line of Sight*, and just wanted to tell me that I got it right. I thanked them, then put down the phone and chuckled. The restaurant in the book? I made that up. It never existed. But that's OK. That they recognise it, and believe it to be real, means that I've done my job. ●