

What's Up Pufferfish?!

Royal Society of Tasmania public lecture.
A Partner Event of Tasmania Reads 2025

Wednesday 26 March 2025, 10:30 –11:30 a.m.

Royal Society of Tasmania Lecture Room, Customs House, 19 Davey St, Hobart

Thank you, Royal Society of Tasmania for this invitation – Julie Rimes, President and Mary Koolhof for extending the invitation, and your RST colleagues. I'm honoured to talk to you at this partner event of Tasmania Reads 2025, the now well-established reading and literacy week promoting the benefits and pleasures of literature across all ages. And that it's run by Libraries Tasmania adds genuine value to it as a truly egalitarian statewide initiative.

Given also that the Royal Society's mission is the advancement of knowledge, this too ensures a vibrant partnership, and I do hope to do some modest justice to that today. I'm sure many of you will know that the Society's extensive Library is housed in the UTAS Special and Rare Collections section of the Morris Miller Library, with some significant holdings including the first book printed in Tasmania; the oldest book thought to be physically present in Tasmania; a first edition of *The Origin of Species*; and many others.

I'd also like to mention up front the role of Libraries Tasmania in helping secure UNESCO Hobart City of Literature status, in 2023 working with Hobart City Council, TasWriters, Fullers Bookshop, UTAS, Brand Tasmania, and with plenty of individual support. This is true international recognition for a small city and I've no doubt Tasmania Reads Week will be able to benefit further as a key public manifestation of our City of Literature status.

At a personal level, as a librarian, I'm thrilled. And as an author, equally thrilled, not least because of my association with Fullers Publishing here in Hobart – Fullers being the publisher of the Pufferfish crime series, the principal business of this morning's talk.

May I in fact also take this opportunity to acknowledge Madeleine Delaney who is with us. Maddy is Fullers' Bookseller and Events Co-Ordinator and current holder of a major national award, the Young Bookseller of the Year announced at the BookPeople Conference in Melbourne last June. Congratulations again, Maddy.

And Maddy if you could also pass on my enormous appreciation also to Fullers Director Tim Jarvis, and further congratulations to Fullers as Australian Book Industry Awards 2024 Bookshop of the Year.

Many thanks also to Hobart-based graphic designer Julie Hawkins, for your very creative and energetic input into each new Fullers title.

Fullers is Australia's oldest independent bookshop. And in a decent case of synchronicity, the Pufferfish series is Australia's longest-running detective series. I'll go into some details on reasons why. But briefly, the longevity, while there has been luck involved, owes much to the location,

this island of Tasmania. Locals like reading about their patch; while interstate and overseas readers enjoy being immersed in the settings of a thoroughly plausible but often unpredictable island. A reviewer on a longtime Philadelphia-based US online crime review site once wrote, quote: “I want to *be* Pufferfish!” – which is the kind of encouragement any author will take.

And may I on this note also acknowledge John Spiers, who is here today, UK publisher who now has some Pufferfish titles under his EER imprint in the UK.

So – in considering how to structure this talk, I’ve decided to let it evolve in a chronological fashion, which is logical, but with behind-the-scenes elements as well, as additional points of interest.

Let me start with a joke. Detective Inspector Franz Heineken, as we know is of Dutch background – a key later feature of this talk, setting up the mysterious Danish connection – and Pufferfish’s diction, his use of the English language, can be a bit unusual. So I was rather taken with something I read recently in the London Review of Books, recounting an observation made by Georges Clemenceau, the Prime Minister of France during the first two decades of the 20th century. Clemenceau was also a journalist, in which literary-minded capacity he argued that because contemporary English has more than eighty thousand terms of French origin, and I quote him: “The English language doesn’t exist – it’s just badly pronounced French.”¹

I mentioned behind-the-scenes, by which I imply some of the aspects of the profession that the reader doesn’t get to see – manuscripts, early editions and so on. And I have on display here about a dozen items which I’ll be referencing during this talk. They may be of some interest to have a look at afterwards, as a visible alternative to PowerPoint imagery.

I mentioned that I am a librarian by profession. It happened because as a determined young writer, in about the year 1979 I decided to write and forego salaried work. That was fine, but for a while only. Getting an honourable mention in a poetry competition does not set you up for life. I therefore undertook a postgraduate library degree at the University of Cape Town and then worked there as a cataloguer.

Fast forward to 2023 and when Leisha and I left Government House Tasmania, where we lived until my retirement, we inevitably had some downsizing to do, including books. But of the many we’ve kept, one belongs to the University of Cape Town Library. My dilemma is that I’d like to return it, but as it’s 47 years overdue what might the fine be?

In Cape Town I wrote two novellas about apartheid which eight years later in 1988 were published in the UK by Bloomsbury. The original uncorrected book proofs and original hardback and paperback editions are on the table, all long out of print. The novellas were published together in one physical book, back-to-back, so that you read one, then turn the book around and read the other. Some bookshops, on receiving their copies, sent them back to the publisher complaining that the stock they received was upside down. They were nonetheless well received and an uncorrected author proof is also on the display table.

Those novellas suggested a potential literary career. And I did have another novel published by Bloomsbury and here under the Allen and Unwin imprint. But the Pufferfish crime series itself

¹ LRB 6 March 2025 page 7.

arose through rejection. A manuscript I had written, called *Bitters End*, a two-hander novel set in the Outback, was politely declined by Bloomsbury – fair enough. They had got me going. But then their Australian counterpart, Allen and Unwin, also declined the manuscript, for reasons to do with verisimilitude – likeness to truth. I was asked to fundamentally alter the storyline, to make it align with a preferred reality. I declined, we parted ways, and that seemed to be the abrupt end of my literary career.

The disagreement had much to do with subjective analyses of and responses to fiction. An analogy might be that whereas one person admires a surrealist painting, another says their six-year-old child could do a better job. I therefore wrote a further fiction manuscript which I called *Maelstrom*, in which a person needs to objectively analyse a huge messy work of abstract art, a great big multilayered, multicoloured thickly applied oil on canvas, buried in which are the clues to a murder. This called for an unbiased, non-subjective eye: a detective's.

It was set in an Amsterdam of my mind, that is, Dutch, even though I lived in Blackmans Bay near Hobart at the time. And so Pufferfish the detective materialised, Franz Heineken, named after a Dutch beer. I sent it to a Melbourne publisher, Mandarin, an imprint of Reed Books, and received a reply from its Director Louise Adler. She liked the character, offered a four-book series but on the proviso it had a recognisable real-world setting. Naturally enough, that became Tasmania. Louise Adler as some of you know went on to become the energising CEO of Melbourne University Press, and she is the current Director of Adelaide Writers Week.

Maelstrom, the original detective manuscript, I put to one side and wrote the first in the Tasmanian-set Pufferfish series, called *Pig's Head*. There's a copy of the very first, 1994 edition on the table. I doubt you would find any of that edition anywhere because they soon rebadged the series to give it a uniform look, with a stylised and stylish Pufferfish cover, like the 1995 *X and Y* cover, also on the table. The newer Pufferfish series spiky handcuffs logo by the way was designed by our artist son Hilton Owen.

My chosen original *Pig's Head* cover, although suitably blunt in keeping with the novel's content, lacked class. The publisher had asked for a cover suggestion. I went to a then butcher shop at the Blackmans Bay beach waterfront and asked if he had a pig's head I could photograph. He did. I took it outside and put it on a dustbin lid and took the shot, which you can see.

In the meanwhile I'd sent the rejected *Bitters End* manuscript to Picador in Sydney. That imprint of Macmillan took it straight away, placing emphasis on its unreal reality as key to its strength. It was published in 1993 with a print run of 3000. We launched it at our Blackmans Bay rented property, a dirt-cheap 5-acre block on Tinderbox Road with sensational estuary views. The bookseller at the launch was none other than Clive Tilsley, then director and owner of Fullers. So there is some more synchronicity, in this long Pufferfish journey. Not least because *Bitters End* does have a direct Pufferfish connection, and it's this:

Soon after *Bitters End* was published, a Melbourne-based film producer contacted me to offer film rights. That eventuated in a movie called *Hurrah*, 1998, starring Marton Csokas and Tushka Bergen, with about a \$3 million budget, the movie made by Mayfair International, a London-based film company. Marton most recently appeared in last year's *Sleeping Dogs* alongside Russell Crowe. The fee for the film rights enabled me to again write full-time, which was wonderful, and I got on with the Pufferfish novels.

The film's Australian producer, Julie Marlow, also liked the Pufferfish series concept and I was able to secure funding to develop a TV series proposal. The funding for that came from Film Victoria. At that time, Screen Tasmania did not exist. I wrote a two-hour pilot screenplay based on *Pig's Head* – it's on the table – and five other one-hour episodes, which Julie Marlow edited. The series obviously did not eventuate although ABC TV were quite keen for a while; but it did mean that something about this strongly identifiably Tasmanian-set book series was working well.

Incidentally the writer of the screenplay of *Hurrah* – the title of the movie of *Bitters End* – in recent years has redeveloped it as potential all-female movie, set in Arizona in the US. His original *Hurrah* screenplay is on the table.

Something working well? Not so fast, David. After the four original Mandarin books, that publisher was folded into Random House in Sydney which declined to take the series further. That was a shame. Mind you, some years earlier a high-profile person in the book world – not I hasten to add a Mandarin or Random House or Picador person – upon hearing that I was moving to Tasmania from Melbourne, solemnly advised that it would probably hurt my literary career if I went and lived “down there”. Mhmm!

Twelve years were to go by before the fifth Pufferfish novel. In the interim however – and without knowing the series would have a future – I was fortunate to be commissioned to write a natural history series, by Allen and Unwin, and I'm most grateful to that publisher. The books on the thylacine and Tasmanian devil have been revised and were republished again in 2023. Co-author on both Dr David Pemberton is here; as ever we much enjoyed collaborating on these.

And in the UK John Spiers and EER Publishing has released an updated version of my natural history book *Shark: In Peril in the Sea*.

Also, with regard to nonfiction, many of you will know that a few years ago I co-authored with Kate Warner, former Governor of Tasmania, the two-volume *Government House Tasmania: A Remarkable Story*. Kate is here today, with Dick Warner. Living and working at Government House, we greatly enjoyed the years of original research on this work, and there was plenty of it, the volumes approaching 600 pages and with about 1000 images. Julie Hawkins designed the books and their elegant burgundy slipcase. The production values are high, intentionally, in keeping with the status of that beautiful heritage-listed estate and buildings on the Domain, with their multifaceted histories and contemporary usages. Sales of that work add to the non-Government income stream of Government House, which I initiated in my time there as Official Secretary; steady income is now derived from a number of sources and projects. As authors in addition to formal work, Kate and I were able to use some of the Covid years down time to work on the books. And I'll return to the subject of Covid shortly.

Now – in about the year 2008 Warren Boyles, then owner and publisher of the famed 40 Degree South magazine, suggested bringing the dormant Pufferfish series back to life. Warren is here today. Again, thank you Warren. The question for me was, what story might best restart the series? I mentioned that back in the 1990s I had written a number of original screenplays with Film Victoria funding. I selected one of those, called *No Weather for a Burial*, and rewrote it as a novel – an unusual undertaking, given that generally it's the other way around, i.e. screenplays are adapted from novels.

Reintroducing a fictional series Tasmanian character after a twelve-year absence required some thought, hence the first sentence of *No Weather for a Burial* is: "There's nothing like a bit of long service leave to put the pips back in a Detective Inspector's core."

It's at this point now that I'll focus on the four forthcoming Pufferfish novels mentioned in the subtitle of this talk, being further chronological stepping stones to the Danish connection.

40 Degrees South published *How the Dead See* as their follow-on title. It's an adapted version of the first ever Pufferfish manuscript – the early 1990s one originally called *Maelstrom*, about the clues in the big messy painting which created Franz Heineken. I did alter it though: the chief character being not a deceased artist but a controversial ex-Hollywood actor living in seclusion near Hobart. Fullers Publishing will release a revised and redesigned edition later this year.

And this is the operating goal, incrementally bringing all of the previous titles under the Fullers imprint, to accompany the more recent novels written as original Fullers Publishing titles, until there is a full set.

The same is being done with *No Weather for a Burial*. The revision for this title is complete and it is in the process of being printed.

The fourth in the original Mandarin series was – still is – called *The Devil Taker*. It was originally published in the later 1990s and I'm enjoying working hard on it now. But no mere tweaking here. This one, for a number of sound reasons, is in the process of a major revision. I'll explain why, in a minute.

But a related digression at this point is useful. Should a published work of fiction be changed? I'm sure many would instinctively say, No! Leave it out there as intended. After all, would a sculptor walk into an art gallery and do a bit more chiselling ten years later? And I think this is a reasonable question to mull over in this week devoted to reading and literature.

I'll give a couple of examples. Recently I had occasion to think about novels published one hundred years ago, in 1925. Two were, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. One is about the insidious effects of shell shock, which affected so many during World War One. The other is about hedonistic capitalism and related moral decay during the so-called Roaring Twenties. Both novels are very much products of their time. Changing a word in either would be pointless.

Or we could go back another hundred years, more or less, to Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. It was inspired in part by galvanism, the concept of using newly harnessed electrical technology to stimulate inert biological organisms and so prove the alleged existence of a vital electric life force. Again, *Frankenstein* was a specific fictive product tied to events of its time.

But back to *The Devil Taker*. As the title suggests it's about Tasmanian devils, the smuggling of them in the vastness of the illegal international wildlife trade. The extinction-threatening facial cancer disease – uniquely spread by biting – hadn't taken hold back then, and in the original novel they're described as being plentiful and just another feature of the Tasmanian bush. Not so.

Also, readers of this series will know that Pufferfish has a long-time informant, a weaselly little fellow called Johnny Shiny. He's useful for Pufferfish. He appears in almost all of the recent

novels. Yet because of that twelve-year gap, I'd forgotten that in the original *Devil Taker*, on page one, he's found murdered! So that has to be given what you might call a pretty substantial tweak.

Interestingly, I gave a talk about my books earlier this month and I happened to mention this Johnny Shiny conundrum, and did anyone have any ideas? A person immediately said, 'Yes, give him an identical twin brother'. I've decided upon another solution ... and no it's definitely not galvanism ...

Also, the devil smuggling novel takes place in Tasmania, Canberra, Sydney, Townsville, Darwin, San Francisco and Los Angeles. And given its original 1990s time period, the method of written communication back then was very much faxes. So they're flying around all over the book. And, really, there may even be some younger readers today who'd hardly know the meaning of the word. Though I could imagine a grumpy Pufferfish going into his office on a Monday morning, seeing them piled high in his in-tray, and saying "Oh for fax sake look at all those!"

So they're gone. And I've introduced some drone technology to assist with the Johnny Shiny business. Funny to think that once upon a time not so long ago a drone meant someone who wouldn't stop talking.

There was also no Australian Border Force back then, and maritime smuggling was considerably less surveillanced.

So – there have been nine novels in the Pufferfish series, across three decades of Tasmanian literary developments. The tenth, for which much planning is in place, centrally involves the Danish connection. It's due in the first quarter of 2026, and is I think likely to be the final one, drawing together key series elements. Here is how it has evolved.

I mentioned Covid earlier. We all well recall the closing of the island to visitors, after a public health emergency was declared five years ago this month, in March 2020. The Tasmanian Government put in place various stimulus packages, including for the cultural industry. It seemed to me that a TV series proposal might be worth pursuing, and one that specifically encompasses selected areas across the island, because a cast and crew are mobile in respect of locations and there are directly associated flow-on benefits for local accommodation, catering and so on. And the finished product can then be exported to promote future tourism. So that could all be achieved by Tasmanians working together in the isolated island.

I generated a Pufferfish TV proposal, an eight-episode series, each being a standard one hour. I created two separate plot lines, one occupying the first four episodes, then leading into the second for the remaining four episodes. And, very significantly an unrelated cold case narrative arc across all eight episodes.

The first plot line plays out across an east-west axis – let's call it from Wineglass Bay to Macquarie harbour.

The second case plays out across a south-north axis – let's call it from Eaglehawk Neck to Stanley. In this way numerous small Tasmanian locations along each axis benefit from the production.

The proposal didn't quite fit standard local funding application models. Nonetheless Screen Tasmania was generous enough to consider the proposal, suggesting a Tassie-Scandi-Noir series,

bringing in a European element. Scandinavian Noir as we know is huge. Making a connection with Tasmania would be original; but with a degree of creative logic given that Pufferfish, Detective Inspector Franz Heineken, has an enduring Dutch i.e. European identity.

Well, an approach through Screen Tas to a large Swedish TV conglomerate didn't work – insufficient connectivity from the Swedish perspective. But it occurred to me that next door to Sweden is Denmark, where of course there is a unique and dare I say it culturally high-profile link with Queen Mary of Denmark – aka “our Mary” – born and raised and educated in Hobart, where members of her family still live.

Interestingly enough, in the early 2000s I worked closely in crime fiction with Susan Moody – she is Queen Mary's stepmother, married to her father John Donaldson. Susan and I conducted a number of crime writing workshops together in Hobart. Susan is a very successful crime author, of some 25 novels including the Penny Black detective series, one of which was listed in a Top 100 Crime Novels of all Time. Susan was also from some years Chair of the British Crime Writers Association.

Anyhow, I therefore reconfigured the TV pitch document as a Tasmanian-Danish series, and, more to the point for the purposes of this lecture, the tenth Pufferfish novel will have the same content. It is called *Where is Knud Bruun?* And while it follows the same two plots – the east-west and the north-south – its third storyline is the real key to the whole series and I'll give you a clue here: is Pufferfish *really* Dutch, as he keeps on telling us? You can launder money easily enough – can you launder a cop?

This involves a big backstory, and in the novel, as in the hoped-for future TV series, a young Copenhagen detective, who is on the outer with her boss, is investigating a cold case, 30 years cold involving the shocking broad daylight assassination of a Danish MEP, Member of the European Parliament. She really wants to crack it, and she's a determined individual. And as it happens she has a nickname: Angelfish. So we'll see what happens there, as her combined cerebral skills and street smarts bring her closer and closer to her faraway target.

There is one dilemma, pleasantly challenging but a dilemma nonetheless, which puts the Johnny Shiny dead-not-dead issue in the shade. I've decided that Pufferfish and Angelfish should have equal billing.

The dilemma is that the novels are written in the first person and present tense. Both are limiting, but those limitations are in fact pretty effective in crime fiction, where leads are followed closely, like a hound on the scent. My challenge is to present both characters in the present tense, as equals. This might well annoy the hell out of Pufferfish, but I no longer care!

The climax takes place on top of kunanyi, with our beautiful city and waterways spread out far below the majestic mountain. I can't wait, and had better get writing.

Thank you again Julie Rimes, Mary Koolhof and RST colleagues for this invitation. And I wish all the very best to everyone associated with Tasmania Reads 2025 and may it grow and grow with our wonderful new UNESCO Hobart City of Literature status.

Thank you.
David Owen