

GEMTOWN

A JACK PAIGE MYSTERY

Des Brady



About the Author

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Des Brady is an author from the Northern Beaches of Sydney where he has lived, loved, laughed and played. Born in London with Australian and Irish heritage, his father was a psychiatrist, and his mother, a nurse. Sydney has been his forever home.

He worked as an urban planner and communications consultant for more than thirty-five years across half the globe. Living a varied life, interspersed with extensive travels around this great country and the world, he has worked in many jobs, in many places – and, of course, is a proud father. He currently volunteers with his local community library after many years as a volunteer life saver.

As an avid observer, his experiences have fostered a deep appreciation of the multilayered nature of the humanity that inhabits our globe. From the remote mountains of Nepal to the bustle of Times Square, the people and the places they inhabit remain an inspiration.

He has written on issues that affect us on an individual and collective scale, from planning and housing to climate change. Approaching his work with an eye to crafting compelling stories that grapple with the many environmental and social issues that face us today, he melds current issues into his stories seamlessly.

Writing both long and short form, his stories explore numerous themes including the human condition, climate change and the environment, as well as fact-based fiction. He also writes the occasional good yarn.

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This is a work of fiction. The places, events, names and characters are entirely constructs of the author or are used fictitiously for dramatic effect. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Whilst fictional, this story is about Australia which encompasses many lands and places that are of significance to Indigenous persons and groups. In all instances, I acknowledge their country, their deep time connections to it and their leader's past, present and emerging.

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*Oh, we'll sink it deeper down:
As the drill is plugging downward at a thousand feet of level,
If the Lord won't send us water, oh, we'll get it from the devil;
Yes, we'll get it from the devil deeper down.*

*Banjo Paterson, **Song of the Artesian Water***

Chapter 1.

*They say you can never return, never truly come back.
Perhaps the trick is to forgive and forget.
It then becomes a matter of how you live, how you exist.
And how quickly you can exit, if the need arises.*

Perched in the driver's seat of his sometime-car, sometime-cab, Jack Paige scratches his beard, watching the relentless rain cascade in sheets against the windscreen as he ponders those words. Trying to recall where he'd heard them. Possibly rehab. Probably.

Yet what most exercises his mind in this moment is the plight of this remote Queensland town. A town to which he's reluctantly returned, after what seems a lifetime away.

There's something about the stench of desperation that casts its pall over a place in terminal decline he muses. A community that sees nothing more than unrelenting suffering and capitulates. Consigning it to those who would not, or could not, leave. Those remaining, those pitiable souls, hoping for better times in the face of all odds.

This feeling, this sense of doom, enveloped him. Taking another lifetime to clear his senses. It's something hard to forget let alone forgive.

Sitting lethargically on those dry and dusty Mulga plains, Gemtown bakes in the unwavering sun. Blistering westerlies propel spinifex balls along rutted and potholed streets as if to remind the town's inhabitants of its precarious existence. It seemed to have no future: gem fields milked of their glittering lode, farms stripped of labour by countless woes, shops shuttered, buildings falling into endless decay, ultimately finished by the grim drought that lasted thirty years.

That's the place he'd left those twenty-five years before. A wretched town with few prospects and seemingly no future. It might have been his birthplace, yet the long hiatus fails to engender any sense of being home, whatever that notion means.

Still, here he is, back again like a cork on the tide.

Jack contemplated these things countless times since returning. Reminding himself of his impending escape once he's settled his parents' estate. As if this would make this homecoming more palatable.

Yet one thing is crystal clear: his exit plan is firmly in place. That homily is true in spades.

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Parked on Main Street this dreary Sunday night, hopeful of a late-night fare, a couple of locals stumble out of the Royal Hotel. Arm in arm they weave their way from under the awning, oblivious to the deluge, singing some drunken song. Fortunately, they haven't noticed him after he's heard the ruckus, turning the cab's lights down and sliding lower in his seat. He doesn't feel like taking home some pissed locals this time of night.

Particularly the Giles brothers.

The relentless rain from this tropical low does nothing to temper his dark mood. Nor the long, fruitless day. Glancing at his watch, he notices the last flight into town has arrived. Hoping to at least jag a final Sunday fare to conclude this dreary stretch, he weaves amongst the potholes. Perhaps some wealthy tourists come to immerse themselves in the life-giving waters of the shiny new Sapphire Artesian Resort, not yet twelve months old.

A wave of fatigue sets in as he barrels down Main Street, rubbing his eyes wearily, attempting to concentrate, bottoming out on numerous potholes on the journey. The window wipers flail valiantly in their meagre effort to clear the unrelenting rain from the windscreen. He doubles down, driving faster, reckoning that speed will help clear his murky vision.

But now discretion beckons as the haze spreads, and he slows, finally pulling up to the kerb at the airport. Wiping the windscreen with his elbow to create a hole in the fog a shape appears at the far end of the platform through the miasma. Standing motionless in the rain.

This was surprising given the small tin shed, somewhat grandiosely titled the Gemtown Regional Airport Terminal, offers some shelter. Still, Jack learned long ago not to be surprised by the surprising.

Pulling up alongside the sodden figure, the back door abruptly opens and the sodden figure flops, dripping wet, into the back seat. The raincoat has been little match for the night's onslaught, and the person is drenched.

He shrugs and peers in the rear mirror, assuming the slight form to be female although the hood of a light raincoat hides her face.

'Where to?' he ventures.

'Sapphire Resort,' the woman's voice comes, low-toned, somewhat morose.

'Sure. Got a little wet, eh?'

No response. Okay, non-verbal. Understandable, being drenched and cold. He looks again, using his rear mirror to spot a face, but the woman's head is bowed, the veil obscuring her features. Jack felt the voice sounded youngish, even familiar, yet she's not a local. It's a strange, hybrid accent, from elsewhere. From where, he's not sure. Wanting to uncover this mysterious person's identity, he ventures again.

'You from out of town?' Again, no response. Oh well, he'd tried; might as well just plough on through the rain.

It takes a while, but the woman glances forward into the cabin. He sees a fleeting glimpse as she checks the mirror for his eyes, then the identification license on the front dash for his name. A half-smile flits across her face, yet it seems a sad smile.

'Hey, how are you, Jack?' the woman asks as she pulls back the veil, gazing at him intently. He blinks rapidly, immobilised as this vision forms before his eyes. Beth Truer, his oldest and closest friend from childhood.

He hasn't seen her since his departure those eons before, so long ago, each pursuing their dreams. Hoping for fame. Or release, at least, from the iron shackles of this remote existence.

'Beth Truer. Well, well, how the hell are you?' His voice is matter of fact, as if they've only seen each other last week. Trying to be cool.

'Come back to Rocktown, have we?' she offers.

Her response comes in a sonorous voice, with almost a sarcastic tinge. Yet she uses the old nickname. The one they'd coined as kids, since that's all their parents ever found: rocks, never gems. That moniker, tinged with irony, formed part of their own special language. Words not spoken for an eternity, it seemed.

'Looks like we all do, Beth. Maybe fate, eh? Or maybe like an old drover's dog coming back to the shed to die. Yeah, we all seem to return, I suppose.'

She lets out a small, sad chuckle and turns her gaze out the window. The years have accumulated since they've seen each other. Yet, it still seems like yesterday to Jack, their time growing together, inseparable as kids, bonded as teenagers, enmeshing their very souls.

Both from torn families, each clinging desperately to the other, finding sanctuary in love, their ambition driven by the desire to become something more than their parents. Both determined to escape the gradual asphyxiation of this doomed place, their love never survived the weight of those burdens.

Beth continues to gaze out the window, not pursuing the conversation, when she catches his eye again with an inquiring glimpse.

‘Do you remember ...’

She holds his eyes, her voice soft as tissues, the pause long and deliberate.

‘.. where the old house is?’

He watches her carefully, closely.

‘Of course I do. How could I forget?’

‘Meet me there at three on Tuesday? Something I want to show you.’

It seems more of a command than a request. Furrowing his brow, questions bounce around in his head, and he ponders why this apparition has suddenly appeared in this godforsaken town.

‘Okay, sure. What’s the mystery, then, Beth?’

‘Just promise you’ll turn up, Jack.’

The sharp, pleading tone makes him hesitate; the intensity surprising. He searches for her eyes again, watching her for a long time. Trying to fathom the reticence, wondering if the distance of those years has forever disconnected them.

Beth Truer, or Elizabeth Lambert, as she’s now more famously known in Hollywood, lowers her head. As if a wall divides them. Feted by the rich and famous, he wonders if fame has changed her. Perhaps she’s risen too far above him.

‘Sure, Beth, no worries.’

He gazes at her, trying to gauge her mood, but she’s now staring out the window, lost in thought. A world away. They arrive at the Resort, and Beth just smiles at him and tilts her head to one side. Just as she’s always done.

‘Really nice to see you again, Jack. See you at three, Tuesday? Promise?’

‘Yep, you too. And I promise.’

Beth drags out her sodden belongings and stands on the kerb, contemplating him with those intense, deep blue eyes. A pleading look. Maybe even one of scepticism.

‘You do?’

‘Yes, Beth, I’ll be there, of course I will.’

She holds his eyes steadily.

‘Have I ever let you down, Beth Truer?’

He winks and gives her the Jack Paige smile, trying to break the tension. She rolls her eyes, gives a giggle, and scurries off into the reception. The thin, wet shroud hugging her girlish frame, giving her a bedraggled yet quite stylish look.

Although he’s pleased to see her, it’s puzzling. After all this time, she appears distant. Yet wants to catch up. Confused by the mixed messages, he wonders if those stories of Hollywood affectations are true; whether the Beth he’s always known, remains. And perplexed about the mysterious meeting. Shrugging, he pulls away from the kerb, deciding to call it a night.

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Returning down a sodden Main Street, his thoughts return to this town, the place that has straightjacketed him yet again. While he felt liberated when he’d prised himself from its noxious embrace so long ago, he has to admit that the Gemtown he’s left doesn’t quite match the one to which he’s returned.

Sure, the miners’ shanties remain, that ragtag collection of old, converted buses with long forgotten destinations still displayed in fading letters above their windscreens. Crippled caravans, often windowless,

tyres gradually disintegrating in strands. Repurposed shipping containers transformed into ovens in the harsh Mulga sun. All gradually being consumed by the brown soil or engulfed by the blade grass threatening to choke them forever. Occupied by those living that fringe existence, demanding their solitude or, more often the case, obscurity. Many hoping never to be found.

But these things don't define the town as they once had. Apparently, there's been a "renaissance," at least that's what the tourist people sprout, the restorative powers of those artesian waters now the town's saviour as people flock to bathe at the recently constructed Sapphire Artesian Resort. They flood the town, apparently hopeful of some new age miracle, the mystical power of crystals, chakra meditation, and incense-shrouded massages enhancing the experience.

Or so he assumes.

Even the shanties are talked up by those spruikers, saying they give the place an "historic gemfield ambiance," the paradox of that pronouncement not lost on those on the fringe.

Passing the obligatory statue of the ANZAC Digger on its plinth, he smiles wryly when he recalls how this town emerged from the Mulga dust.

A place so familiar to those first peoples who saw mystical storylines in the landscape and reaped a bountiful harvest, until those usurpers came. Driven by greed and the prospect of boundless wealth after a couple of wandering drovers discovered gems. In that great Australian tradition, it grew around a pub built by two enterprising Irish ex-convicts to quench the thirst of parched miners working in the harsh, odious conditions.

And, as the luck of the Irish would have it, the boom that followed saw the town swell to a few thousand people, making Fintan and Seamus O'Donoghue rich beyond their dreams. As they say, the ones that make money in the minefields are those that sell shovels.

Or grog in this case, he chuckles.

It grew haphazardly along a slightly crooked main street that steps warily around a large gum tree that acted as the town's whipping block in those wild colonial days. Men bound to its trunk, awash with flesh and blood, punishment for some infraction. Or, in the case of a more severe reckoning, a rope strung from a bough overhanging the street for the hangman to wield his supremacy. To those early citizens, the bloodied, pockmarked Flogging Tree was tangible evidence that "civilisation," and all it represented, had finally tamed the frontier.

The influence of the O'Donoghue boys and their militia expanded, imposed to protect growing wealth, welcomed by a community cowed by the lawlessness of the town's early days. The town prospered and expanded, and saw the establishment of a police station, courthouse, post office, general store, school, butchery, and drapery, giving it a sense of permanence. A gaggle of shops came and went as its fortunes waxed and waned, its streets set out in an informal pattern hanging off the central spine of Main Street, small lanes inching downward to the creek and up Porky's Hill, the rise named after the pig farmer that originally inhabited that part of town.

Some semblance of community came and, in that other great tradition, the local Catholic Church claimed the high point of the settlement as if to remind the townsfolk of their place in society, consigning Porky to the lowlands. A town conceived in adversity, with the O'Donoghue brothers as its patron saints.

Or ruthless overlords, depending on which way life fell for you.

Jack smiles, recalling his time here as a kid with Beth. Running wild, kicking dust along the town's streets, exploring the gemfields in the blazing sun, peering down cavernous shafts, the "three footers," that lead to another world below. Chased away by toothless old men jealously guarding their patch. All while their parents toiled in the oppressive conditions, seeking out the "wash," the raw material from below, that would deliver them paradise. A Sapphire or, if they're lucky, a flawless Ruby.

Thwarted like so many that came before, unable to break the shackles that consigned them to this place forever. Relegated, as were all, to the hovels they grudgingly called home. Guarded by vicious dogs, loaded guns at the ready, those suspicious stragglers, haunted by shadows in the night, imagining their meagre life savings being spirited away by imaginary thieves.

His parents remained to the end of their days, poor, bankrupt. It indeed had become a town that reeked of misery.

Despite grave predictions to the contrary, the town has prospered and grown. The local pub, shuttered for so long, has reopened, and confidence seems to infuse the place. Perhaps it's time on life support is over, he reckons. Even the Mayor, Peter O'Donoghue, spruiks about the green shoots of recovery, saying it finally heralds the town's renewal. An ironic observation, Jack had thought at the time, given the landscape had been desiccated to a crisp by the dry until recently.

Yet the drought has broken: the landscape transformed. And the town exudes optimism.

Even though he can muster some enthusiasm about Gemtown's future, he knows it will not include him. Once he settles his parent's affairs, and expunges that other black mark against his family's name, liberation from this hellhole will come.

Manoeuvring through the rain, he passes the Flogging Tree and the Big Sapphire or Ruby, whatever they call that atrocity. Coming to another eyesore, he grimaces. Gemtown's ode to inhumanity, the garishly decorated bronze memorial erected to those callous O'Donoghue's. Testament to their ruthless rule.

Winding through the rain-drenched streets, he remembers young Beth Truer, when she ached to be an actress. Playing out scenes on their own private stage beneath that enormous Brigalow Tree on her farm down near the old swamp.

And now here she is, back in Gemtown. To what end?

Well, he'll doubtless find out soon enough, he chuckles lightly to himself, as he heads into the damp gloom. Wondering where this little journey will lead him.