

Praise for *The Devil's Grip*

'The Devil's Grip is a remarkable piece of work. It is a strange, unusual and beautiful book with an incredibly unique setting.

I don't think I've read anything quite like it. The author's honesty and truth is a major highlight. True crime. Memoir.

History. How do you live a life honestly and with dignity?

It's difficult to categorise it. It traverses so many genres.

But it WORKS.' **Matthew Condon, author of the**

Three Crooked Kings trilogy

'On its face this is the story of a family steeped in the pursuit of the perfect ram, but beneath the surface lies a riveting and ribald tale of lust, loss, manipulation, unbridled ambition and ultimately murder.' **Mark Tedeschi AM QC, author of *Eugenia, Kidnapped* and *Murder at Myall Creek***

'This story has got it all: sex, domestic violence, "the land" – such an important and significant concept resonating in the Australian mind – landholders and property, privilege, prejudice, skulduggery, and murder. I honestly couldn't put it down until I'd finished it.' **Dr David Bradford, author of *The Gunners' Doctor* and *Tell Me I'm Okay***

'An unforgettable, courageous and deeply tragic local story which manages to become a universal tale. No mean feat.'

Gregory Day, author of *A Sand Archive* and

Archipelago of Souls

THE DEVIL'S GRIP

The Devil's grip is an expression used to describe a genetic defect in sheep. It is an anatomical depression of the spine, just back from the head and neck; a small indentation considered to be a flaw on the show circuit. Sometimes it goes unnoticed or can be disguised by the fleece or hidden with clever grooming by a savvy handler. But the thing is: somewhere, at some champion sheep show, if not this one, then the next – it will be discovered and that prize-winning line will forever come to an end.

PROLOGUE

In the early hours of Wednesday, 18 March 1992, seven shots rang out through Victoria's rolling Barrabool Hills. As the final recoil echoed, a sheep-breeding dynasty came to a bloody and inglorious end. No one could have anticipated the orgy of violence that wiped out three generations of the Wettenhall family, much less the lurid sex life of the man behind the world-famous Stanbury sheep stud, Darcy Wettenhall, that emerged from the gruesome aftermath.

Now, twenty-seven years later, the complex events leading to that night have been unravelled. Bob Perry had been Darcy Wettenhall's secret lover for a decade prior to his murder. He is key to understanding the extraordinary success of the award-winning Stanbury sheep stud, the multi-layered complexity of Darcy himself and the most grisly, bizarre and apparently motiveless murders the region had ever witnessed.

From the bucolic majesty of Victoria's most prized pastoral lands to the bleak, loveless underworld of orphanages, rodeo stables and homeless shelters, the story of Bob Perry and Darcy Wettenhall is a sobering meditation on the fragility of reputation, the folly of deception and the power of shame.

PART ONE

The Business

I wonder sometimes, was there a time before Bob Perry came into my life? When exactly did I meet him? Did he seek me out in order to tell this story?

Sometimes you court a story but sometimes the story courts you. Other times, it circles around like a vulture and you can try batting it away. You can say I don't want to write you but with some tales, they just won't shut up. That's how *The Devil's Grip* was for me.

About four years ago my partner Pete and I were on one of our many trips back from Melbourne to our home in Inverleigh in country Victoria. We were driving through the Barrabool Hills with all its pretty farms and fancy ponies when we cut down Devon Road. Halfway along there was a property called Stanbury and Pete said casually,

'That's where that business happened with the Wettenhalls.'

'What "business?"' I asked.

'Don't you remember, a triple murder back in the nineties?'

The Devil's Grip

And I did remember it vaguely. Something about a sheep breeder, AIDS, and a farm worker with shotguns. Had it been a hate crime? A crime of passion or a robbery gone wrong?

These murders were of another ilk entirely. The victims were Darcy Wettenhall, a 52-year-old internationally renowned sheep breeder, Guy Wettenhall, his handsome 23-year-old son, a plumber, and 81-year-old Janet Wettenhall, a pillar of the sheep breeding establishment.

‘There was a lover somewhere in the picture, all very cloak and dagger,’ Pete tells me. Little did I know that the lover and I were already acquainted.

Pete remembered the cachet and aura of success that Darcy Wettenhall carried about him. ‘When Darcy walked into a party everyone turned their heads. He was quite a legend in his time.’ Pete had also known about his ‘little secret’ before it came to light. So I could only guess how many other people did too.

In 2012, I opened a bookshop in Colac. Having only recently moved to the country, it was a great way to be at the centre of a community and a fantastic vehicle to build connections with people. Colac is where I met Bob Perry, who is the reason I’ve written *The Devil's Grip*.

Bob lives in the misty Otway Ranges near Colac and is gay, has been for years, and reads more books than anyone I know. Five or six years back, Bob had been on the phone to someone who’d been into town for a haircut. She’d been talking to her hairdresser, whose son works at the menswear shop who reckoned there was a gay bloke opening a bookshop right on Murray Street. ‘He doesn’t even hide it!’

The Business

The rumours turned out to be true and Bob came by one day and gave me that country wink us fellas live by down our way and he bought one of my novels. Soon, he bought another and another and eventually I had to buy one of my own books off eBay to give him because I didn't have one single copy left. We chatted and became friendly. Then one day he said, 'Have I got a story for you.'



The story of *The Devil's Grip* began to unfold over a midwinter lunch in 2017. We were sitting around a table in Bob Perry's Carlisle River farmhouse with glasses of red wine, fire blazing. My partner, Peter Fairman, and Bob Perry both grew up on farms in Victoria's Barrabool Hills, just west of Geelong. They knew the same families and acquaintances, shared many stories and laughed a lot about the past. It was like old home week when they got together, cosy as a Western District kitchen at smoko. I could listen to them for hours as they talked about who married who and which fella had run off with so-and-so's missus. But beneath all that *bonhomie* each possessed a keen knowledge about the differences in class and background that governed social manoeuvring in the farming community; about the secrecy and shame that went hand-in-hand with grandiosity and respectability. So 'the business at Stanbury' was bound to come up again. How could it not?

This time photos came out from Bob's archive: the young man, handsome enough to break your heart in moleskins and blazer – candles alight on his 21st birthday cake; the

The Devil's Grip

prize-winning sheep breeder, apparently in the prime of life; and the rather grand old lady, hair drawn into a refined bun, expression inscrutable. Images of all three of them lay scattered on the table amidst a photographic collage of prize-winning sheep, grinning kids, sunshine days, dogs and ponies. Each face, squinting back at us from a quarter of a century ago. I grabbed my phone and searched up some grainy news clippings from the local newspapers of the time. How sensational the articles were. How scant the background and shallow the reportage on this unwieldy beast of a story. But sensational it had been and, like all sensational stories, chunks of the truth were buried with the victims.

‘We could tell this story, Bob,’ I said, glancing over the decades of memories sprawled before us. ‘We could tell this but it would have to come from you. You are key. It wouldn’t be a betrayal of truth but a rectifying of it.’

Bob sighed. ‘I suppose someone will have to tell it soon or everyone will be dead.’

The truth is, four people already were. Three of them died on the same night. The rest of us? Well, none of us is getting any younger.

The Farmer and the Fiddle

All great fortunes start with a theft or a lie. This one began with both. A stolen, prize-winning ram hidden in a chicken coop shortly after World War II and a cockamamie story about how the best beast on the entire stud was not fit for sale. It was a Corriedale ram, the finest ram on the prestigious Elcho Park Stud, belonging to a former senator, James Francis Guthrie. It was the ram that would become the foundation sire to one of Victoria's most feted sheep studs: Stanbury. It was 'the one that got away'.

Farming folk can say what they like about country people being easygoing but in the world of livestock, it is all about breeding. It's about the pedigree of everything from the sheep and cattle, to the pigs and dogs. Only then do you come to the humans.

Wealthy Victorian farmers send their children away to private schools in Hamilton, Geelong, Ballarat or Melbourne to have them return with clipped vowels and curious old

The Devil's Grip

English ways, while the less well-to-do toil away and school their kids locally. Their words tend to run together and some end up saying arks instead of ask and youse instead of you. In that sense, everyone gets what they pay for. There are hints of feudalism to it still and in days past, people talked about *people* as 'people': 'Her people were Perrys or Fairmans or Drinnans or Whatever.'

I pause in my dinner preparation one night when Bob says to Pete, 'No, no, his mother was a man', only to be told she was a Mann. 'Nee Mann,' I say. 'No transgendered parents tucked away in the closet to add more colour then?'

The 'Western District' is referred to often in Victoria and it encapsulates lands west of Geelong and as far north as Ararat, extending west to Hamilton and Portland. It's a big, rich area of farming. The Barrabool Hills are minutes from Geelong but worlds away from Melbourne even though Melbourne is only an hour away in the car or by train.

People who stay in the district remember their lineage the way Indigenous Aussies know their songlines. Protestants waltzed cautiously around Catholics in the dance halls of yore, poorer men worked for richer men, and women married well or not so well. People were 'good lots' or 'bad lots', much like land or livestock. 'He was a boozer and a basher', they'd say or 'She never could keep her skirts down'. Even today, the conversations of unreconstructed folk who populate Victoria's west might not please the politically correct, your pinot gris sippers might hightail it and your PC police flush scarlet with rage. In pubs you feel the dark brood of masculinity. It's easy to tell who's had too many beers and hear the brutal timbre of manhood in the

The Farmer and the Fiddle

profane language blokes use to hide any gentleness they might otherwise reveal. Occasionally there might even be violence. Push some bloke's buttons when he's been on the grog and he's liable to knock you into next week, but seldom does it end in murder. Masculinity is a strange and dangerous brew but, hell, you knew that already.