

GETTING WARMER

Alan Carter

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Cato Kwong is back in Boom Town. It's midsummer and everyone's feeling the heat. There's a firebug on the loose. Local gangs are playing tit-for-tat. Australia Day looms and the police force is braced for an outbreak of bad behaviour. A man has had his throat slashed in a local nightclub and, just to keep things interesting, the streets of Fremantle are haunted by someone with a short fuse and a sharp knife.

Meanwhile, at the Fremantle Police Station, DI Hutchens has struck a deal with long-time informant Gordon Wellard, who he hopes will help him solve the cold case of missing teenager Bree Petkovic. And Detective Lara Sumich is cooking up a little heat of her own with Major Crime secondment Colin Graham.

In any copper's day there are petty annoyances: paper-pushing, big egos and (for Cato, anyway) an unpredictable boss who walks a hazy moral line. With personal problems of his own, Cato finds little solace in the service of DI Hutchens and the Freo cop shop.

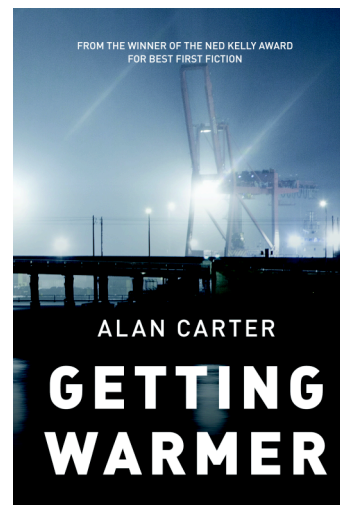
As summer wears on, and the body count rises, Cato finds himself feeling a little too sympathetic towards Bree's mother Shellie – a soon-to-be-suspect in the murder of Gordon Wellard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Carter was born in Sunderland, UK, in 1959. He holds a degree in Communications Studies from Sunderland Polytechnic and immigrated to Australia in 1991. Carter wrote his first novel, *Prime Cut*, while living as a 'kept man' in Hopetoun, on the south coast of WA. *Prime Cut* was shortlisted for the prestigious UK CWA Debut Dagger Award, was runner-up in the Penguin Crime Writing Competition and won the Ned Kelly Award for Best First Fiction in 2011. Carter is a TV documentary director and currently works for *Who Do You Think You Are?* on SBS1. He lives in Fremantle with his wife Kath and son Liam. *Getting Warmer* is his second book in the Cato Kwong series.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How are Cato Kwong's perceptions of right and wrong challenged by his relationship with Shellie Petkovic? Is it possible for a police officer to entertain ideas of natural justice when their obligation is to uphold the law?
- Should there be a place for natural justice as well as the law in our society?
- How easy/difficult do you think it is for a police officer to occupy a consistently solid moral position? Do we expect more from police officers than we do from other members of the community?
- How do concepts of justice and a right to be protected by the law look from the perspective of Karina Ford and her family?
- What kind of a character is Dieudonne? What kind of a character is Colin Graham? What points is Carter making about immoral and amoral behaviour?
- If Dieudonne and Graham occupy one end of the moral spectrum, where do characters like Cato, Hutchens, Lara and 'Farmer John' sit?



- Is it possible to see 'the Job' (i.e. a professional life in the police force) as being something from which police officers cannot resile? Does the Job have different significance to different characters such as Cato, Hutchens, Lara, Santo and Graham?
- Consider the trajectory of Lara's journey in this novel. Do her experiences with Graham lead her to view the world differently? Is her character redeemed by the novel's end? What acts of courage do we witness from her?
- What does Lara have in common with other female characters Shellie Petkovic and Karina Ford? Are these parallels she herself would be likely to recognise?
- What do the roles of 'bit part' characters like Mrs Papadakis, Karina, Jeremy Dixon (Fagin), Santo and Clarrie the didge player contribute to the novel?
- What kind of a place is Alan Carter's 'Boom Town'? What is the 'character' of this place? Is it a world that we recognise?
- How do some of these characteristics manifest in individual characters?
- Behind Dieudonne's story lies the 'magic dust' tantalum (pp. 168–170). What is tantalum? What connections does Carter make between Africa and Australia via tantalum?
- In *Getting Warmer*, race relations in Australia are explored through the prism of gang warfare and the African child-soldier Dieudonne. What do you think Carter wants to show the reader about race relations in contemporary Australian society?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Do you think that researching and writing crime novels in any way skews your view of the world?

Do you mean I'm bitter and twisted? You might be on to something there. The writing does give me a chance to vent my bad angel and say the things I'd love to say but often don't. DI Hutchens tends to serve that purpose. On the other hand Cato is my good angel – I get to be more noble through him. In researching the novels I'm often looking behind the headlines to see how a particular seemingly isolated incident could be placed into a meaningful and sinister pattern. But, like many crime writers, I suspect, I also never fail to be amazed and sometimes depressed at the realisation that no matter how many absurdities or horrors I can dream up – real life often trumps them.

In the course of research/writing what did you learn that you didn't know before?

I learned what damage you can do with a carefully placed ballpoint pen, what the inside of Casuarina looks like, what the Fremantle Detectives office looks like, and all about the life and times of the ancient mining magnate Tantalus.

Gordon Wellard is a nasty piece of work. When you were writing this book were you consciously exploring different kinds of immorality and amorality with which characters like Gordon Wellard, Colin Graham and Dieudonne are equipped?

To put myself into the mind of Gordon Wellard I had to find my inner psycho creep – and believe me I had to dig really deep – honest. Each of those characters represents a certain kind of amorality that seems to emerge repeatedly in the news headlines and some of which I think embodies the darker side of a seemingly affluent yet increasingly heartless society. So through them I deliberately wanted to explore what I see as one of the zeitgeists of contemporary Australia.

Why did you choose to have a rogue character like Dieudonne in this book? What relevance does his character have to contemporary Western Australian society?

I like Dieudonne. He's scary, ruthless, and a very efficient assassin (for the most part) and that world of violence is all he's ever known since childhood. But for all that he is his own man and he's driven not by greed but by a need to understand, to belong, and to fulfil his sense of self-worth. Still, I wouldn't like to meet him late at night in a dark alley.

Did you also use the gangs the Trans and the Apaches to make a comment about the world in which we live?

The Trans and the Apaches embody the extremities of the boom culture – there's a profit to be made and they ruthlessly set about exploiting their commercial opportunities, engaging in the odd bloody bout of anti-competitive practice, forming strategic business alliances, and rationalising unproductive assets. In crime fiction it takes the form of drug-dealing, killing and wounding the opposition, paying off dirty cops, and disappearing your traitors. Grist to the mill.

Lara plays fast and loose in this novel, but in the course of so doing she almost has an epiphany. Is she a useful vehicle for some of the things you wish to explore?

Lara is ambitious, calculating, and morally challenged and has a bit of a chip on her shoulder. I had to dig deep there too. But ultimately she does know the difference between real right and real wrong. She operates in a world where sometimes you have to do bad things for a good reason – and vice versa. It's classic crime fiction territory.

Getting Warmer, like your first book Prime Cut, explores some disturbing aspects of contemporary Western Australian society, especially corruption and racism. What drives you to write about this?

Both corruption and racism seem to feature big-time in much of what we see, hear and read in the news these days. What happened over the last couple of decades? It's like affluence and the boom barged in through the front door and tolerance and respect slipped out the back. I better stop there, I'm beginning to sound like a grumpy old man.

What's next for Cato Kwong?

He's going to Shanghai. I'm headed there for a two-month residency later this year and I thought I'd take him too. He's gone from Hopetoun (*Prime Cut*) – pop. circa 2000, through Freo (*Getting Warmer*) – pop. circa 40,000, to Shanghai – a megacity of twenty-odd million. Along the way he'll get deep and meaningful and explore his identity and be placed in grave peril – several times. Watch this space.



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