

## THE GALLERIST

MICHAEL LEVITT

### ABOUT THE BOOK

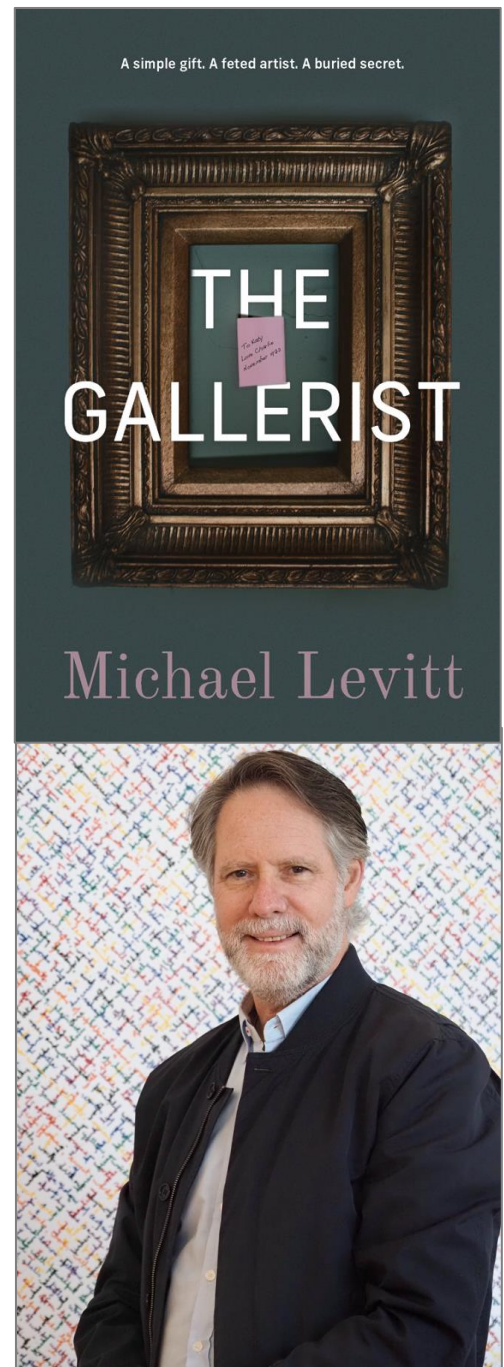
*The Gallerist* is an artworld mystery for lovers of cosy crime. Mark Lewis, a former surgeon, retires to run a small art gallery following the death of his beloved wife. But his life of solace abruptly changes the day a local woman brings a painting to Mark for valuing. Jan Bilowski tells the gallerist it was created by a seventeen-year-old boy with cerebral palsy and that it was once a gift to her sister Katy. Why then does Charlie's abstract work look exactly like a James Devlin – an artist with an illustrious career on the other side of the country? When Mark sets out to discover the provenance of the painting, he is joined by Linda de Vries, who has connections to the school Charlie once attended. But what will be the price for asking questions about the celebrated James Devlin, the man whose past is as blank as an empty canvas?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Levitt is a practising surgeon and health bureaucrat. He has been collecting art for many years, and has written numerous articles about art and artworks for newspapers, magazines and art exhibition catalogues. An exhibition of selected works from his and his wife Carolyn's personal collection was held at Ellenbrook Gallery in 2021. *The Gallerist* is Michael's first work of fiction.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does this novel fit within the cosy crime genre?
2. How would you describe Mark Lewis's relationship to art?
3. In what ways has art saved him following the death of his wife, Sharon?
4. What kind of expectations and hesitations do Mark and Linda each bring to their budding relationship?
5. What tensions arise as a result of the way the author has structured the book from the points of view of Mark Lewis and James Devlin?
6. What would you say these two men have in common, and what values do they share?
7. How would you describe each man's moral compass?
8. Do you have any sympathy for the decisions made by James Devlin's mother? To what extent is she a product of her time?
9. What character attributes did James Devlin share with his mother?
10. What other choices do you think James Devlin could have made when he was a young man?
11. What is the impact of being a secret keeper on the holder of the secret?
12. **'If James had ever felt anger towards his mother, it had – along with many emotions – been hidden deep inside, and could no longer be retrieved.'** (p. 191) To what extent has James Devlin's life been shaped by his mother's decisions?
13. On p. 35, Linda says to Mark: **'You talk about these artists as if they were all still alive, as if you knew them all.'** How would you describe your own response to artworks to which you feel a connection? Why is it that you connect with some pieces of art and not others?
14. How do different clients of Mark represent different possible attitudes towards art and being an art collector?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

**Where did the idea of *The Gallerist* come from, and what was your greatest challenge in writing this book?**

I am seriously addicted to collecting art and I especially love the idea of working out the origins of works of art – not just who painted them (since that is usually known) but what inspired the work, what the painting is about, what was happening to the artist at that time, where the work of art has been displayed and by whom it has previously been owned. All of these things add greatly to my appreciation of any painting. So, a story about the mysterious origins of a painting is pure pleasure to me.

The greatest challenges in writing this book were two-fold. One was finding the necessary blocks of free time to allow me to progress the storyline. Because of the sheer difficulty in allocating time to the exercise, it turned out to be a lot more drawn out than I'd have liked. And the other challenge was swallowing my pride and accepting that the book needed lots (lots and lots) of editing before it was fit for presentation. I learned a huge amount about the importance of maintaining pace and momentum – mostly by being asked to remove self-indulgent detail!

**Can you tell us something about your own relationship to art?**

I grew up in a house with art on the walls and really did buy my first painting aged just thirteen. Having sold that work to my late father about ten years later (for some quick cash), and the painting having then been sold along with the office block in which Dad had hung it, I reconnected with it almost forty years later, still hanging in that same office block. That it was an exciting, almost emotional moment for me to identify this long-lost painting that I thought had disappeared forever, goes to the heart of the extent to which art appeals to me and, at times, moves me. I love Ernest Philpot's quotation – at the front of the book – in which he elevates art above the commonplace objective of depicting the world in which we live to the lofty height of being a gateway to the creation of an image of life's essential truths. For me, art has a deeply spiritual appeal, and I have tried to convey that sense in this book in the words and actions of the characters I describe.

**How did you go about building an oeuvre of abstract paintings for James Devlin – in the novel, they seem to be very vividly realised.**

I have had the pleasure of writing articles about works of art for exhibition catalogues, thanks to my great friends Pat and Ian Flanagan. This has required describing each of the paintings, the way in which each work reflects its artist's oeuvre, what it portrays (or who) and where the artist now fits in the world of Australian art. Since Charlie's painting appears within a page or two of the start of my book, I realised that I had to be able to include a credible description of it then and at other times throughout the story. And, since the connection I was developing between Charlie's painting and other works by James Devlin, scattered in galleries and offices and homes around Australia, was central to the story itself, I felt that I needed a small body of similar works to which I could refer, each of which I could, if needed for the story, describe in equally credible detail. Such descriptions can only be based upon real works, and I realised that I'd have to commission someone to create this body of works. I'd been lucky enough to have encountered Teelah George in the process of tracking down (and buying) a terrific work of hers I'd seen in an art magazine. I put a proposal to Teelah to produce a series of nine works of varying sizes. I gave her only the most basic description of the storyline along with the requirement that the works be in acrylic and purely abstract in nature. I provided her with the masonite boards and she was happy to collaborate with me.

I've commissioned art on only very few occasions only – there is always the real prospect of disappointment due to the disparity between my expectations and the artist's interpretation of the commission. But Teelah's natural facility for abstraction meant that, in this case, my expectations were exceeded and the ease I felt when describing them in the novel reflected my confidence that the works fully warranted the great (albeit fictional) acclaim attributed to them in the book. The process by which Teelah's paintings were conceived,

proposed and realised is a small story in its own right. It has been just one more pleasurable aspect of this endeavour.

## **Is there more cosy crime on the horizon for Michael Levitt?**

I would love to write another novel and I have an idea about a storyline that might work. But I would want to do it a little differently next time, setting aside much more time for the writing, and editing it with more diligence before presenting it to the poor people at Fremantle Press. Writing is, I've concluded, a very selfish undertaking – having to isolate yourself from your surroundings and immerse yourself in the fiction, spending long periods of time on your own, and then subjecting yourself to repeated episodes of intense focus during the editing process. To do it justice, you need to be free to think, write and concentrate on the task at hand. I really hope that I can find the time to write another novel and do it differently.



@FremantlePress



Sign up for enews



fremantlepress.com.au