

The Brothers Wolfe

STEVE HAWKE

ABOUT THE BOOK

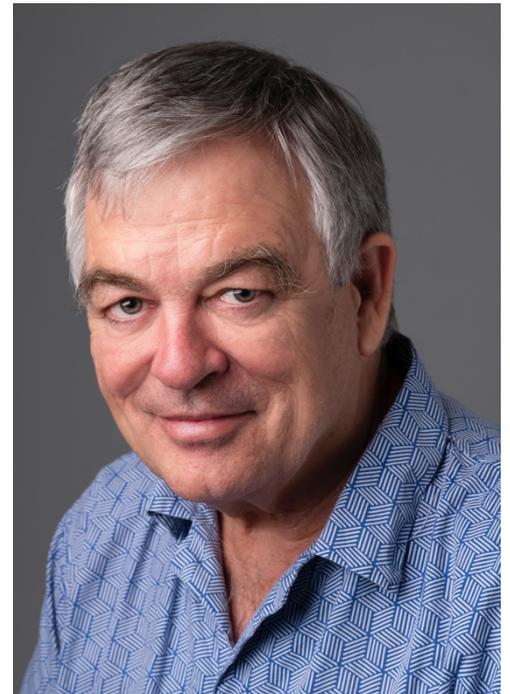
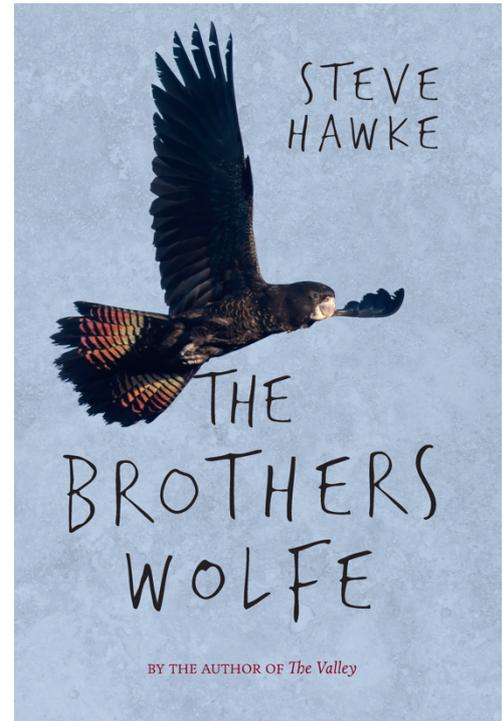
When seventeen-year-old Athol Wolfe learns he is a shareholder in his father's menswear business, he wants no part in it. He's still finding his way in the world, and Great-Aunt Ida's revelations about the family's fortunes are disconcerting. But his entrepreneurial older brother, Elliot, sees only opportunity and potential. Back from a European stint with the mysterious French beauty Mitzi, and living for the thrill of the deal, Elliot sets his sights on joining Perth's movers and shakers. It is 1980, and in the State of Excitement, development profits are ripe for the picking. Elliot soon has a seat at the uproarious lunch table of the state's biggest and brashest new entrepreneurs, Adam Bland and Maurie Cornell. But while Elliot builds his empire – or is it a house of cards? – Mitzi makes other plans, and his brother Athol, caught up in Elliot's schemes, can't shake the feeling that for every winner, someone has to lose.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Hawke grew up in Melbourne, then lived in the Kimberley for many years, before settling in the Perth hills. His first adult novel, *The Valley*, was published in 2018, and his second, *Out of Time*, in 2019. He has also written the stage play *Jandamarra* (2008 and 2011), the libretto for the dramatic cantata *Jandamarra: Sing For The Country* (2014 and 2019) and the children's novel *Barefoot Kids* (2007). His non-fiction writing includes *Noonkanbah: Whose Land, Whose Law* (1989), the biography *Polly Farmer* (1994) and *A Town Is Born: The Fitzroy Crossing Story* (2013).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a character is Athol Wolfe and what kind of a character is his brother Elliot?
2. How would you describe the relationship between them?
3. What difference does it make to the novel that it also contains the character Great-Aunt Ida?
4. How do Mitzi's dreams and ambitions sit in relation to those of Elliot?
5. How would you characterise their relationship?
6. How does the generation gap make itself felt in the entrepreneurial enterprises of Rupert Wolfe and his son Elliot?
7. Do you consider Elliot to be culpable when compared to the other entrepreneurs around him, or is he just unlucky?
8. What kind of a place is WA, that it can contain characters like Freddie Wolfe and Marta Rigoni, and why are they important to the story?
9. What is the symbolic importance of hazelnuts in this novel?
10. What do you think this novel has to say about family loyalty?
11. What do you think it has to say about following one's dreams – and the cost of following them?
12. How is family loyalty complicated when other relationships are added into the mix (like Mitzi's brother René and Athol's wife Stella)?
13. The most satisfying period for Athol seems to be the years he spends as a stay-at-home parent while Stella continues her paid career: a choice unusual for its time. How did this affect your feelings about him?
14. Is history (and family history) simply a matter of perspective?
15. What do you think might be some of the challenges of setting a novel in a time period that is still within living memory?
16. What difference does it make to the reader that we might find echoes in the novel of real people in characters like Adam Bland and Maurie Cornell?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What was it about this era that compelled you to write about it – and where did the brothers Wolfe come from?

See epigraphs two and three – Donald Trump claiming entrepreneurship as an art form, and a psychoanalyst comparing the psyches of entrepreneurs to those of juvenile delinquents. I'll admit to a horrified fascination with these men (they are all male, aren't they?) who fancy themselves as titans. Why can enough never be enough? Why the animalistic imperative to grow ever bigger, to outdo every competitor? In the 1980s I did have some very marginal dealings with a couple of the 'big boys' and state politicians at the heart of WA Inc, and was astounded by their bombast and hubris. Fertile ground, I thought to myself.

So the seeds go back more than thirty years. As does one of the characters. The chapters describing Great-Aunt Ida's trip to the Kimberley in the years before World War One are lifted from one of my first pieces of fiction, a short story titled 'Promises of the Past', published in 1993. (Though I would dare to suggest that the Ida of *The Brothers Wolfe* is a lot more complex and interesting than that ingenue.) That short story is framed as a young man listening to the memories of his great-aunt, so perhaps the seeds of the Athol Wolfe character had been sown back then too.

The story of the Wolfe family fortune being based on the disinheritance of Frederick Wolfe is based on a truth. I knew and worked with an Indigenous family in the Kimberley who had been robbed in exactly this way: the will of their white patriarch disregarded. It always seemed so emblematic of our colonial history, and was always going to find its way into this story that I wanted to tell.

Where did the brothers idea come from? I needed to create a young entrepreneur a rung or two below the Bonds and Connells, as the central character for the book I wanted to write. But I needed a counterbalance; an alternative viewpoint. I think if I'd had to dwell solely within the mindset and viewpoint of Elliot the entrepreneur I would have driven myself crazy. Thus I imagined Athol, the antithesis of action-man Elliot, for whom knowledge hangs around his neck like chains instead of pearls, to misquote the first epigraph. It happened a long time ago, and I can no longer remember the specific origins, though it is probably there in one of my notebooks. But I think the notion of two brothers with divergent attitudes to this family history, as well as to their contemporary lives, is where it began.

It's been a long time in the making, this book. It may or may not turn out to be my magnum opus, but it has a bit of that feel about it: a grand stage, and grand themes, and an attempt to examine the psychology of a notorious chapter of Western Australian history.

Do you feel sympathy for any character in particular?

All of them! If you can't find a way to relate to, and empathise / sympathise with the characters you create, you are not doing your job as a novelist.

That said, the reader will probably guess very easily that young brother Athol is the character closest to my own mindset and world view, and is, in some respects, the author's voice in the book. (Though I'm not as wimpish as he is, I hope.)

I love Mitzi. I've got no idea where she came from, but I really love her. In the discussions about the title for the book, I voted for 'The Brothers Wolfe', but had some concerns that this was unfair to Mitzi, as she carries as much weight in the book as the two brothers. But in the end, I said to the publisher, 'I reckon Mitzi can stand on her own two feet.'

And, let me say, Cynthia has a certain mad magnificence, and indifference to reality, that appeals to me.

Did you encounter any surprises during the research process or as you delved back into the era of WA Inc.?

Not really. I am old enough to have lived through it. One of my touchstones as I wrote was a book called *The Bold Riders* by financial journalist Trevor Sykes. It is a forensic examination of the high-flying entrepreneurs of the 1980s; how each of their empires was built, and how each crashed. What continually astounded me was how ruthlessly cavalier they were with other people's money, once they had got their hands on it. Essentially anything went, and the mug punters were fair game. *The Brothers Wolfe* doesn't tell the half of it, but I hope it does provide some insight.

Getting my head around the intricacies of the truffle industry did take a bit of doing, I'll admit.

What's next for Steve Hawke?

I've already completed the first draft of my next novel, which has the working title *Quiet Man*. It is a much smaller work, and very different in nature to *The Brothers Wolfe*. Ideas are bubbling away for the one after, and there are a couple of non-fiction projects in prospect. It has taken until my sixties, but I seem to have reached the point of being a full-time writer, and it's a good place to be.