

## DEATH HOLDS THE KEY

ALEXANDER THORPE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1928, on a property near Kojonup, widely despised farmer Fred O'Donnell is found dead in his study with a bullet hole in his chest. But the murder occurred in a locked room, and the weapon and its wielder have vanished without a trace.

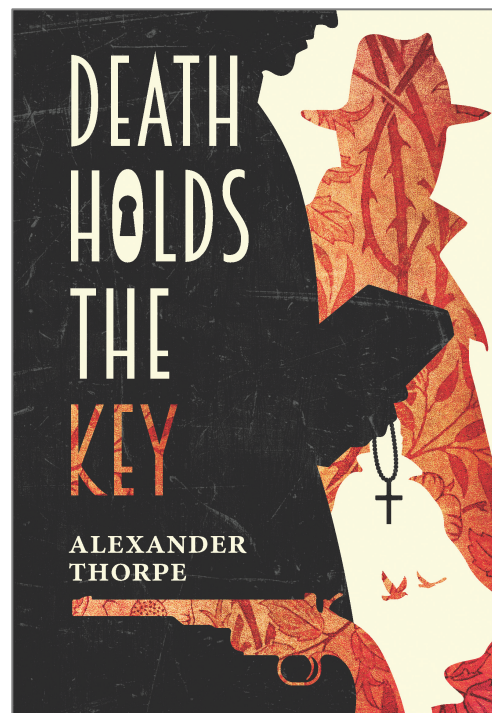
For rookie Detective Constable Hartley, fresh from the city, his only good fortune is that a nameless mendicant has offered to help him investigate a crime in which everybody has a motive, but nobody has the means.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Thorpe grew up in the suburbs around Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia. This novel is the second of the Mendicant Mysteries, following *Death Leaves the Station*, though each can be read as standalone. When not writing, Alexander can be found inflicting his idiosyncratic brand of English on innocent students, exploring new frontiers in miserable music or embracing his insomnia in the company of an old British radio drama.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this novel called *Death Holds the Key*?
2. What does the book have in common with novels from the Golden Age of Crime Fiction, and writers such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Arthur Conan Doyle?
3. Who is your favourite character in this novel and why?
4. Do you think that DC Hartley could have solved this mystery without the assistance of the mendicant? Discuss.
5. What do we learn of Hartley in the course of the novel, and what does he learn about himself?
6. What kind of a character is the mendicant monk? How does his own personal history contribute to his understanding of what transpires?
7. Why is Fred O'Donnell generally reviled?
8. Do you think his death was inevitable? Why or why not?
9. Do you have more sympathy for him by the novel's end?
10. What do you think this novel is saying about the roles of, and expectations on, women in the first third of the twentieth century?
11. How do the experiences of each of the women in Fred O'Donnell's life (his wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and sister) reflect these challenges?
12. Do you think the rural setting amplifies these issues, or is it just a useful way of focussing the drama?
13. Why do you think the author has chosen to include the scene in the shearing shed? What aspect of Australian history is he representing here?
14. Why do you think DC Hartley chooses to apply justice in the way he does at the novel's end?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***Death Holds the Key* is the second book in the Mendicant Mysteries series. Were there some themes you particularly wished to explore in this book?**

I look at these stories mainly as entertainment – writing them is entertaining, and with any luck, reading them is entertaining, too – but it's hard to write a crime novel without exploring the idea of justice. There's a long history of whodunnits being used to shed light on what justice looks like in a particular time and place – who has access to it and who shapes it. While a lot has changed since 1928, there are very clear parallels between the people who were denied access to justice then and those who are still struggling to access it now, and I found it impossible to write the story without exploring those connections.

**Why did you choose DC Hartley as the sleuth that the mendicant would accompany on this investigation?**

In the first book, the mendicant was working with a police officer who had an inflated sense of his own importance – someone who had grown too comfortable with the power of his position. He and the mendicant approached things from opposite sides, often confrontationally. After that, I wanted to see how the mendicant would work with someone who had a completely different relationship with policing, a man at the very beginning of his career who isn't at all comfortable being an authority figure. I think it results in something more akin to the relationship between Holmes and Watson, something based on mutual respect and appreciation.

**How did you go about researching the world of late 1920s Mid West? Were there any surprises?**

I'm addicted to Trove, the National Library's online database. I actually did a little happy dance when the government passed a bill to continue funding it – I think I read more newspapers from 1928 than I did from 2022 while I was writing this book. I also read plenty of fiction from around that time to try to get a broader context and a feel for the way people spoke. As with the first book, it was fascinating to re-evaluate my idea of how specific historical trends and technologies spread; the fact that the hospital in Albany had an X-ray machine before it had a phone pops back into my head at least once a week.

**What is next for our mendicant?**

He's eventually heading back to the UK to try and seek redress for past wrongs, but he'll be sidetracked by a few things on the way (funny how these amateur detectives seem to attract so many murders, isn't it?) The next book is in its infancy, but it does look as though someone might try to stab him with a harpoon, so that'll be a fun change of pace.



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