

O'KEEFE

DAVID WHISH-WILSON

ABOUT THE BOOK

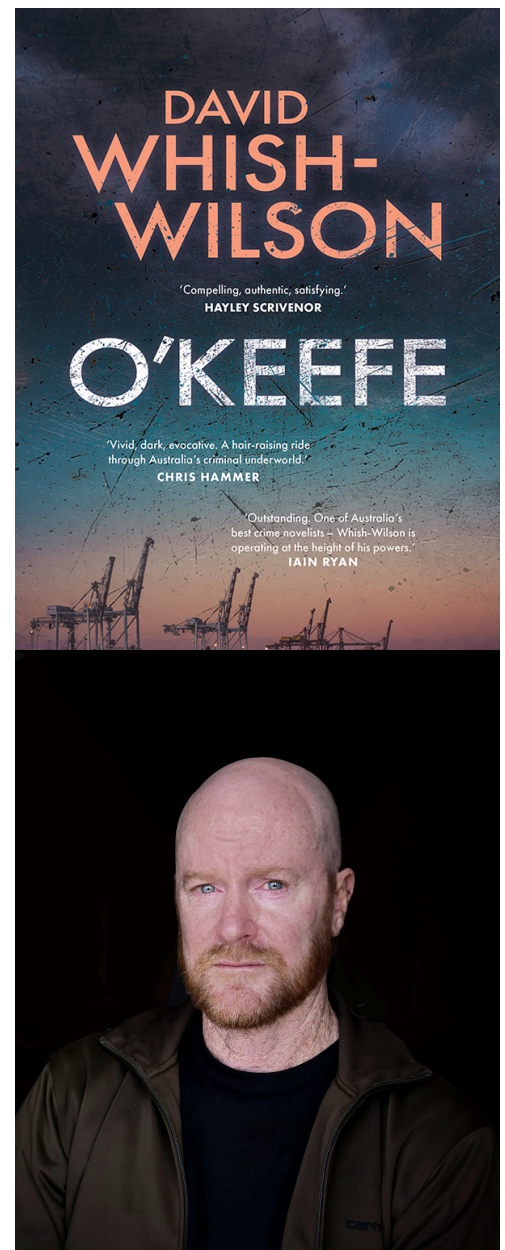
Having survived imprisonment on the high seas, undercover operative Paul Cutler becomes Paul O'Keefe. His mission: find the source of Mexican cartel meth flooding Australian streets. Embedded in a security firm at Fremantle Port, O'Keefe uncovers a shadowy network of illegal operations. As rival factions battle for control of the port's smuggling routes, he finds himself entangled in an increasingly lethal power play. This high-stakes crime novel about the 'cocaine gold rush' provides a front-row seat to one man's battle against a relentless criminal tide.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Whish-Wilson is the author of eleven novels and three creative non-fiction books. He was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, but raised in Singapore, Victoria and Western Australia. At eighteen, he left Australia to live for a decade in Europe, Africa and Asia, where he worked as a barman, actor, streetseller, petty criminal, labourer, exterminator, factory worker, gardener, clerk, travel agent, teacher and drug trial guinea pig. David is the author of four novels in the Frank Swann crime series and two in the Lee Southern series, two of which have been shortlisted for Ned Kelly Awards. *Cutler* was the first novel in David's Undercover series. David currently lives in Fremantle, Western Australia, with his partner and three kids, and teaches creative writing at Curtin University.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *'He feels a little more ... impulsive, which is going to be useful.'* (p. 33)
This is how Paul O'Keefe describes his new identity. How would you describe the new identity of the man Paul Cutler has now become?
2. What do you think the effect might be on a person who is always playing a different role in a real and dangerous world? Do you think you might lose your sense of who you really are?
3. Why do you think Paul does it, even though he has PTSD from previous assignments?
4. What does the following passage tell us about O'Keefe: *'O'Keefe kept the smile on his face until he was headed down the stairs and Skye Dillon was gone. The truth was that he felt a little sick at dosing the dealer so bad. He had no love for men like Michele, but it was important to maintain the boundaries, to deny himself the tainted pleasure of dominating another man so completely. That kind of pleasure was the poison that motivated men like Finn Dillon, and most of the others in their world. O'Keefe was different, he told himself. He worked for Malik Khalil. There was a line there somewhere, but he knew that he'd crossed it.'* (p. 61)
5. What do we learn about O'Keefe from his interactions with Ryan – and what do you see as Ryan's role in the novel?
6. What is the nature of this assignment with Portside Security, and what is Finn Dillon's role in it?
7. Why do you think that the author has included the character of Skye Dillon in this novel?
8. How does she complicate O'Keefe's role?
9. How would you describe the relationship between O'Keefe and Madden? Does it change over time? What does Dillon mean when he says of the latter: *'We've all got our personal demons, but some blokes become their demons.'* (p. 87)?
10. What role does violence play in this novel, especially between men? What do you think an author might consider when writing violent scenes?



11. How much freedom does Paul have as an operative, and how much protection from what Malik Khalil can offer him?
12. How is the contraband being brought in?
13. Who else has a vested interest in the smuggling operation? What are the stakes here?
14. In what ways are our ports vulnerable to illicit trade?
15. What did you learn from this novel about real-life criminal activities that you did not know before?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What kind of research did you do when preparing to write this novel?

Unlike a lot of research for my previous novels, the research for this novel was largely conducted online. While I received general background on Border Force difficulties policing the massive growth in drug importation from a friend, and some general background from people who know more about the cocaine trade than I do, because this is a rapidly evolving situation, a lot of the most relevant and current research is available on the web. There are a lot of media reports, private documentaries and podcasts on this issue, particularly centred upon Europe and the fears surrounding the effects of the cocaine trade on the democratic institutions of countries like Holland, Belgium and parts of Spain. The issue is similarly relevant in Australia because Australians are per-capita one of the largest consumers of cocaine, and yet the wholesale and street prices are extremely high. This makes drug importation extremely lucrative. At the time of writing, a tonne (a mere one thousand kilos, or half the weight of an average car) of cocaine can wholesale for \$180 million AUD. Let that sink in for a moment.

What were the challenges in this new novel giving your undercover agent, formerly Paul Cutler, a new identity? Do you share any of his skill set?

I wouldn't say I share any of his skillset, although it's true enough that like many writers, I've always been a bit of an outsider. The advantage of being an outsider is the potential development of heightened observational skills, and the ability to imagine yourself in another's shoes – important for Paul Cutler/Paul O'Keefe as he tries to pass himself off as someone he isn't.

Do you have any parameters or guidelines for yourself when it comes to the depiction of violence in your work?

I try and minimise the use of violence, and only use it when necessary. Unfortunately, when you're writing about organised crime and the international drug trade, it's a truism that because of the money involved, the supply chain of a drug like cocaine is blood-soaked from production to the final point of sale. It would feel disingenuous to not represent this accurately to a certain extent. My own parameters for this kind of representation involve trying to make sure that every employment of violence is there only if it's absolutely necessary. I have witnessed a lot of violence, and in fact murder, and I weigh representations of violence against my own experiences – if it feels like a representation might traumatise a reader, I don't use it.

How are the issues of drug smuggling and Australia's cocaine 'gold rush' being addressed in the real world?

Sadly, they aren't. We, like most countries, are locked into a prohibition cycle where the only people who gain from it are politicians who get to talk tough on crime, and organised crime figures themselves. I am certainly not pro-drugs, having witnessed the damage that addiction causes firsthand, however, thinking of drug use as a criminal rather than a medical issue (as we think of alcoholism, for example) appears extremely short-sighted. We know that for every drug seizure made that a larger proportion of supply remains unhindered, and I certainly don't envy Border Force or local police tasked with trying to achieve what simply isn't possible using a punitive prohibition model – the cessation or even the minimisation of harmful drug use. A good reference for those interested in the history of the so-called 'war on drugs', its consequences and how some countries are breaking with the prohibition model, is British journalist Johann Hari's *Chasing the Scream*.

What's next for David Whish-Wilson?

I'm putting the final touches on the next Lee Southern novel, set in Perth in 1999, while trying to daydream my way into a premise for the next Paul Cutler novel.



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