

SOUND MIND DEAD BODY

DAVE WARNER

ABOUT THE BOOK

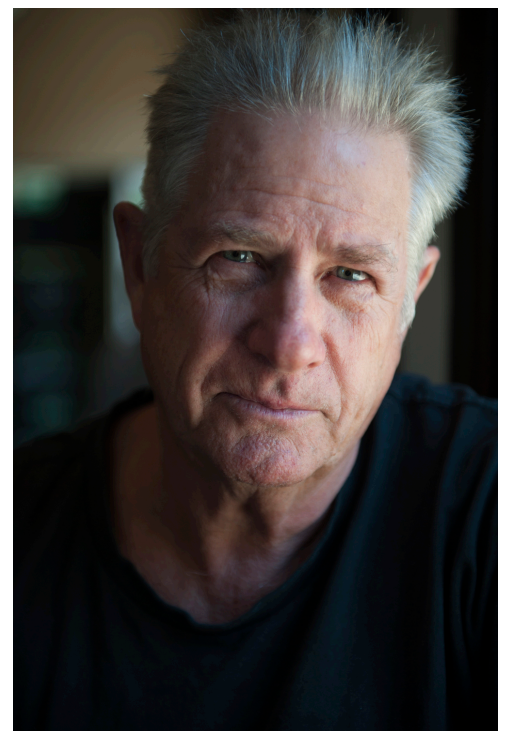
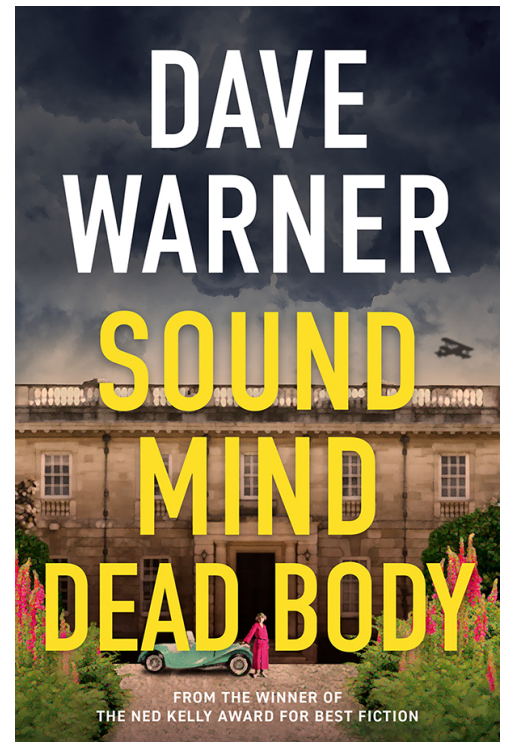
At a manor house in Devon in 1929, the Pedhurst and de Reve families gather to hear matriarch Julia Pedhurst (née de Reve) read from her late husband's will. One of the house guests is former fighter pilot Fred Willets – now an inspector in the Kalgoorlie Gold Squad – who has come to the UK as a beneficiary of the will. When Julia inexplicably dies before the reading, and another death follows soon after, everybody in the manor house becomes a suspect. It is up to Willets, assisted by bright young pharmacist Prudence Meadows, to crack this atmospheric whodunnit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Warner is a writer and musician. He is a winner of the Western Australian Premier's Award for Fiction, and the Ned Kelly Award for Best Crime Fiction. *Sound Mind Dead Body* is his fifteenth crime fiction novel and the first to feature Fred Willets. Dave has also written for feature film, television and stage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the Golden Age of Crime?
2. Do you have a favourite novel, or author, from this era?
3. In what ways does this novel conform with what we expect from a cosy mystery?
4. How does the reading of a will set the scene for potential murderers?
5. Why do you think murder victims in such cosies are often so unlikeable?
6. What different motives do the family members have?
7. Does it make a difference to have a Goldfields detective as the sleuth in a Devon manor house?
8. How would you describe the character of Fred Willets? In what ways does his prior experience equip him to investigate the crimes that take place in Harcroft Manor?
9. How would you describe the character of Prudence Meadows? What strengths does she bring to the investigative team?
10. How do the resonances of the First World War make themselves felt in this 1929 setting?
11. How do the coast and immediate environment also play into the nature and execution of the various crimes?
12. The 'parlour room reveal' takes place in the closing chapters of the novel. Did you correctly pick the murderer?
13. What do you think would happen in Chapter 22 if the author had continued his writing?
14. If you were to plot your own cosy mystery, how would you go about it?
15. Who would your villain be? And who your detective?
16. What would be the motive for the crime?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

You mostly write police procedurals, and private investigator–led novels. What is it about the Golden Age of Crime and a cosy mystery that appeals to you?

The very first crime story I wrote was a murder weekend play – in fact, that is the original source material for *Sound Mind Dead Body*. That was 1983. While I had read and loved Sherlock Holmes and Raymond Chandler mysteries, I did not read Agatha Christie until 1980. By 1983, I had read every one of her books. She hooked me with a mix of atmosphere and plot, and I enjoyed the Art Deco era too, in which many of her best stories are set. Plot is prime in this genre, and characters can be types – less complex than in other genres – but the detective must engage us. I love the bout between detective and reader as to who can solve the puzzle first, and I admire the craft of the writer to give the readers all they need to solve the crime, and yet still fool them.

How did you plot this one out?

My aim was a homage to my favourite Agatha Christie novels and so I wanted to write a classic ‘drawing-room’ murder with limited suspects, numerous red herrings and a fictional place where we’d all like to spend a weekend or two. While the 2019 film *Knives Out* has seen a revival of the Golden Era transposed to modern times, I simply wanted to recreate for readers the same pleasure they might get if a previously lost Christie turned up. Where most ‘clue-dunnits’ fall down is that not every character has a completely credible motive for being the killer. So my first task, even before I decided who the murderer would be, was to make sure each could be the killer, both as to motive and opportunity. Next, I looked for some inspiration as to significant events to obfuscate the machinations of the main crime. I also needed to ensure that my ‘cast’ were cut off from the world beyond. I wanted that claustrophobic feel. In the end, I had to essentially plot seven different crimes that might have happened. A couple of the twists, of course, came from the grand dame herself.

You often have strong female ‘Watson’ characters to your male ‘Holmes’, as well as a sweet love interest? Is Dave Warner a bit of a hopeless romantic?

Yes, I am a romantic, but for *Sound Mind Dead Body* there were good reasons for creating a character like Prudence Meadows, who may play second fiddle to Fred but has her moments of writing the score. Firstly, I am well aware that female readers are the great majority of fiction readers and that especially in this sub-genre that would overwhelmingly be the case. I’m hoping my usual hard core male readers will come with me on this one, but they might not, so it’s important for me that my female readers can have a relatable and hopefully sympathetic character to join them on the clue-solving journey. I also felt that Prudence gives the story some real humanity. She also brings out the humanity in Willets. And while I sometimes feel that the romance subplots in Agatha’s books weren’t her strong point, I believed it would be terrific fun to make Prudence like Agatha – a smart young woman who was also trained in pharmacology and science. I think the period post–World War I was a time when many young women had to resign themselves to being spinsters because the young beaus had been killed off. It gives a poignancy to Prudence’s and Fred’s stories.

What’s next for Dave Warner? Will we get to meet Fred Willets and Prudence Meadows again?

Oh, I hope we do get to meet them again. I love this genre and hope it gets enough reader support to justify more. Next up though is a return to my very first detective hero, Snowy Lane. The feedback I get is that he remains my readers’ favourite Warner detective, though Dan Clement is closing the gap. Snowy will be returning with a blockbuster story of mystery and suspense in 2027.



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