

## Posse

Kate Welshman | Random House Australia | 2009



The Melbourne Bar boasts Elliot Perlman. Nicholas Hasluck was putting out excellent fiction well before his elevation to the Western Australian Supreme Court. For the High Court, there is of course Ian Callinan. Hasluck himself, in his 2003 reflection *The Legal Labyrinth*, provides a commentary on one of Callinan's works.

In Sydney, the late Harold Glass as Benjamin Sidney wrote *Discord within the Bar*, as well as a short story collection,

summons every person above fifteen years old, and under the degree of a peer, [was] bound to attend upon warning, under pain of fine and imprisonment.'

These days, it can be something different. Since 1985, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, it has had a colloquial meaning, 'A set of (esp. young) people associated by being members of a peer group'. For Welshman, 'posse' covers both. At the start of things, it is no more than the descriptor

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Barristers and judges are in the business of straw houses. They build them. They fan them. Then they blow them down. Or not. Depending. It is these things, specifically, which marks them for stamping 'not natural novelists'.

A novelist, after all, is in the business of permanence. Not an Ozymandian permanence, to be sure, but something of the bricks and mortar variety, and never mind the odd clay foot. But – as barristers and judges well know, it being the cliché upon which their bread is both-sides buttered – every rule admits of an exception.

One example is the late Sir John Mortimer, whose Rumpole stories were only a portion of his output. As for the Americans, I logged into the 'Our people' section on the webpage for the US firm Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal, where I found that one of its Chicago partners was a Harvard graduate with the professional area 'Litigation – White Collar Criminal Defense'. The rest of us know him as Scott Turow, with Grisham at the fore of the legal thriller market.

while Richard Beasley has two titles under his gown, *The Ambulance Chaser* and *Hell Has Harbour Views*.

In Kate Welshman, we have another exception. She has been at the bar since 2004. *Posse* is her first novel. Aimed at an altogether different market, this is young adult fiction, although the 'parental guidance' warning is justifiable, as a centrepiece of the plot is a sex attack on the protagonist.

*Posse* is set in a summer at the Riveroak Recreation Camp. Year Eleven from the Methodist School for Girls find themselves in a heatwave which rolls into their own friendships.

The title is an interesting choice. Last century, when I was young, the word had only one meaning. It was the group in the westerns which was rounded up to chase down the hero or the villain, depending. Or, for the more discerning audience of *Bar News* and as Blackstone put it, the sheriff could 'command all the people to attend him; which [was] called the *posse comitatus*, or power of the county: which

for the same thing in any school around the world, that group which performs the cruellest of children's games, Exclusion. By the end, it is something altogether different, with each different member passing different judgment on the other, the posse turning upon itself.

*Posse* is not *Lord of the Flies*. It doesn't pretend to be. However, it does have something new and worthwhile to say about youth, loyalty, authority and the cruel realities of that compendium which we are pleased to call 'human nature'. Welshman deserves to do well with her first novel, and should turn her mind to the next.

**Reviewed by David Ash**