
CRIME FILE

Woes of a failed male

TETANUS, cancer, involuntary celibacy, a hole in the roof and a tattooed oaf sitting in his visitor's chair, size 10s parked on the walnut veneer. You name it, chances are that single father and true believer Murray Whelan's got it in Shane Maloney's mischievous *Stiff*. The life of a political minder and besieged electoral officer in John Cain's Melbourne is complicated enough in 1984 without a femocrat ex, "deep, festering pools of bad blood" at Trades Hall, a snap-frozen Turk, drugs under the mattress and the red-hot Ayisha Celik knocking at the door. It's no wonder Whelan climbs into the matrimonial cot with "Understanding Family Law", "A Practical Guide to Financial Planning" and "Court Procedure".

Stiff, an ecologically sound regional mystery set among the ethnic feuds, union shenanigans and sexual politics of Melbourne's working-class heartland, is a deft comedy of daggy manners, its jokes ruefully resigned to the condition of things in a town where the wind entertains itself "by stripping the last of the blossoms off the flowering cherries in Princes Park".

Equipped with little but invisible networks and uneasy ambitions, Whelan steers a clapped-out Renault and a wonderful naive, bordering hysterically at times on the delusional, around Melbourne's north. He talks of his life as if hoping to resume himself from his failings, saying the sort of things that from someone less witty might seem foolish.

Comrade Whelan is an amiable personification of flawed maleness. The kind of bloke who can still make an inept play for a married woman in a Pizza Hut at 6.30 on a Tuesday evening, stone-cold sober: "Close-up, the red of her hair was shot with henna, an affectation from which I took strange encouragement."

Maloney, like his hero, has a nice gruff way with language and an open and rapidly moving eye. Ayisha, com-

STIFF

By Shane Maloney

Text Publishing, 217pp, \$14.95

MORE DEATHS THAN ONE

By Robert English

Allen and Unwin, 398pp, \$12.95

ROUGH JUSTICE

By Victor Kline

Allen and Unwin, 148pp, \$12.95

By Graeme Blundell

munity development worker, speaks with the teasing upward-rising inflection kids teach each other in schools where only the teachers speak English at home, but her "bosom spoke of silk cushions, fretted screens and tinkling fountains". Gavin Mullane, "something indescribably minor" in the *Miscellaneous Workers*, had grown up "in the shadow of his father, an experience that had left him damp". Wendy, Whelan's estranged wife, calls from Canberra but can't stop the Methodist Ladies College abrasively resurfacing in her voice, "that censorious interrogative at the end of sentences".

At times the humour turns into a more disquieting comedy. Maloney appreciates that in Melbourne there aren't distractions to the introspective and troubled use of the mind and that satire needs something deadly to hone itself against. Most of the best Melbourne humour and most acrid social observation is a reaction to having to live there.

Open Robert English's *More Deaths Than One* and you're in Sydney in 1974, a medieval place of uneasy imaginings and many deaths. *More Deaths* is like a museum case of exhibits of human disorder. "King Freddie", a lawyer, and Greg Hartman, already one of the wealthiest men in the country, control the underworld, and now they want to take \$2 million from the town of

Hazelwood to stake a \$20 million robbery from the Reserve Bank. English refuses to turn away and no disclaimers are tacked on to this violent, unrelentingly pessimistic book. Its characters play to a new set of rules — no conscience, no morals and no regrets. The men are deciduous and can shed all trace of emotion with seasonal clockwork; their women pray to a non-existent God that they will be safe.

English writes in a renegade style, terse, deadly familiar and deadpan, with plenty of *noir* conventions: the mixture of Scotch and red wine leaves pains in the head and shoulders, the Dexedrine wears off by noon. Roberta Flack is singing on the hi-fi about how much she misses some guy called Jesse, the light is formica white and the moans and gasps of sex have a glacial edge.

Freud thought the act of murder had its origins in the nursery: you can only wonder at who changed English's nappies. His photo shows a man who has looked devils in the eye. His face speaks to us from a deep place of knowing.

Barrister Felicio Tagg, the wonderfully incompetent, unimpeachably unsuccessful hero of Victor Kline's *Rough Justice*, has trouble with justice too. At the bottom of the barristerial barrel, Tagg has never left a courtroom with winged victory perched on his shoulder: "Like the much sought after, but mythical, perfect circle, he just went round and round in a fixed groove, unbroken, undefiled and unimpeachably unsuccessful."

Then, briefed by mistake, he finds himself among the paddocks and pesticides of Cootamundra, pursuing both his client's missing stud bull and his disenchanted wife. Kline's use of language is appropriately erudite and occasionally fanciful, and he has a rare ability to be both oratorical and intimate. A most engaging indictment of the lawyering trade.

Graeme Blundell is a Sydney director, actor and writer.