



## Kerry Greenwood

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I don't do many book reviews here. Back in the day, I occasionally wrote them for the newspapers. Sometimes I would return to sender, following my beloved mother's advice that if you can't think of anything nice to say, then don't say anything. I suppose I am a hard marker in some respects; but I know what I like, and I know what I don't. Too many books seem to be either middle-class people writing about middle-class problems; or else middle-class people writing about what they imagine to be the problems of the underclass. As a wharfie's daughter, I don't really go for books like that.

I'm making an exception with this novel. As its lurid title suggests, this is a book not for the squeamish. It's also a reissue on the 20th anniversary of its first publication. And why was it re-published? Because it's hilariously funny. Writing books that make your readers laugh out loud is tremendously difficult. Geoffrey McGeachin did all that. I'd never heard of him before. He has written more since, and I intend to try them out as well.

The cover notes use the phrase 'wildly unbelievable' for the plot. I searched in vain for the word picaresque in the reviews. Because this book is vintage picaresque. For the Leavis-worshippers of old, this meant Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding and the like; but the picaresque novel is way older and less Anglo-centric than that: stretching back to the Middle Ages. (Voltaire's *Candide* is the standout.) Improbable things happen, certainly. But none of Martin and Faith's wild adventures are beyond the fringe. Disbelief merely needs to be modestly suspended rather than sent to its room without supper.

The other point about this wonderful book is that it is a hymn of joyful praise for this Big, Brown Land. If you love Australia as it actually is, warts and all, then you will love this book. The villains are suitably and colourfully villainous. The family Martin deserts might well have been treated a little more sympathetically; but this was my only quibble with the book. Nearly all of the characters we meet are wonderful. GK Chesterton wrote of Stevenson that you may suspect everyone you meet to be an exiled king in disguise.

But this is Australia, and we prefer our kings a long way away across the seas. The considerable cast is crammed with unexpectedly vivid, self-reliant and wonderful strangers. Everyone seems to want to help out Martin and Faith. And you can see why. Considerable skill has been expended on keeping a slow crescendo in his characters. Stevenson began *Treasure Island* with his four pirates introduced one by one. The first is only slightly scary. Then Black Dog appears and disappears, and he is more alarming. Then Blind Pew, who is truly terrifying. And finally John Silver, who seems affable and pleasant until we get to know him. So with McGeachin's rogues and unexpected friends. The highlight for me was the biker gang who have taken over a retirement village. These chapters are hilariously breezy and optimistic.

Do buy this book. It is available here:

<https://www.clandestinepress.net/products/fat-fifty-and-fu-ked>