

Book Review

Bill Chandler



'Bruny'

Heather Rose, 2019, Allen and Unwin

What a prescient novel! Infrastructure, regional planning, political shenanigans, foreign interference, and even the mention of a virus. Heather Rose has written a thriller with more credibility than I was comfortable with as I sat on my North Bruny deck looking over the D'Entrecasteaux Channel to Tinderbox on the Tasmanian mainland. A serene and beautiful location: an island, off an island, off an island. I had a clear view of the massive bridge which was the subject of this novel, except there was no bridge, because it's a fictional story, isn't it?

The new world order is subtly on display. A Federal Government makes gung-ho, albeit secret, assumptions about how to find its place in the new world order, to gain power, keep power, and exercise power, with a degree of incredulity which would make anyone already cynical about politicians and their advisors go red in the face. Splashing a cool \$2 billion dollars on a super-size design award-winning bridge linking a very small island at the end of the earth with Hobart, a city of less than a quarter of a million people. Nothing fishy here. Nothing to see, move along. What could go wrong?

The prologue sets the scene: a bomb, sabotage, badly damages the nearly finished bridge, but not beyond repair. Who dun it? Everyone is suspect. The first chapter introduces Astrid, a United Nations conflict resolution specialist. She escaped Tasmania many years ago and was resistant to become involved, but

she was persuaded to 'come back home' to smooth the way so the bridge could be repaired and opened before election day.

The project is urgent. The Feds have provided the money. A State election is just a few months away. Both the State Government and the Opposition support this 'critical infrastructure which will define the new Tasmania'. Notwithstanding the questionable logic of the project, they just need to ignore and overcome the noisy landowners and environmental protesters and ignore the Greens (even though they are doing very well in the polls). Divide the conflicted unions who want the work, but don't want the imported foreign workers deemed necessary to finish the project before election day. Appoint special task forces to make sure that the construction meets the less than transparent economic and political imperatives, and avoid any negative media, even if death is involved. Keep in mind: this is a novel.

Now safely back in self-isolation in suburban Melbourne, I am reading 'Bruny' a second time - because it is very well written, and paints in accurate details the place I was in as well as the wider world context. Not for the first time, a fictional book or film or play can provide more insight into real life than everyday working as a Planner. This novel asks the challenging question 'what would you do to protect the place you love? Frequently required to assess how the prioritisation of infrastructure projects are determined, I am left with a niggling feeling that perhaps 'Bruny' is a documentary, in the same way, that TV's 'Utopia' is a documentary rather than a work of fiction.

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