



***Drowning City* by Ben Atkin. Auckland: Random House (2014). RRP: \$37.99. Pb, 255p. ISBN: 9781775535522. Reviewed by Jane Orchard.**

Times are tough! Hoover has been voted out and Roosevelt is beginning his presidency. The bootleggers, the club owners, the mafia gangs all know that the end of

prohibition is nigh and when 'the constitution gets scribbled on some more' their days of wealth and power will be gone. They have to maximise their opportunities in these last days.

This is the Great Depression. The resultant society of extremes is the playground of this noir novel, ***Drowning City* by Ben Atkin**, with its hard-bitten detectives, but this version quietly links us to the present because the same thing, to a lesser degree, happened in the bank crashes that began around 2008. We feel the familiarity when the bum on the train says: 'I had a real apartment with solid walls and furniture. I paid real rent that cost real money. It was expensive but I paid it on time, every week. Even though it was hard I did everything I had to, and more, because the cash I paid it with was real. How could all of that be taken away by some – some banking blunder?'

The noir novel has been brought up to date and now it sports, not a detective as its hero, but a criminal. Fontana is on a desperate quest to find the truth about a missing shipment of illegal single malt. His life depends on him finding the answers. In the search, he showcases for us a variety of political exponents, their beliefs, their strengths and their weaknesses. We glimpse the world of Karl Wayright, the fascist, and 'Red', the communist among a variety of lesser players. Politicians can be bought but these people are, in some eyes, idealists. In ours, they become fanatics.

In this world, nothing is real. Almost everyone is playing a role or trying to be what they are not. Cops enter the story but they aren't cops. Allegiances change but only on the basis of self-interest. At the bottom of every person is the need to gain power and money and this need takes over their lives and their personalities. Our hard-bitten crim proves to be wrong about those he thought he could trust and wrong about those whose loyalty he questioned. He decides that the

world of Monet, the impressionist, is 'more real than anything because we ourselves can never know how real things are.'

Fontana's reason for embarking on a life of crime is that there were only two ways to escape poverty – to become a cop or a criminal. Because the Church made a perpetual sinner of you anyway, the life of crime was not so difficult a choice. 'Live by the rules and you'll be a victim for the rest of your life,' the bum on the train tells him. Is he right?

Important people flourish with no names. 'Red' has no name. He is not a person – merely a doctrine. Nor does 'the Frenchman', a powerful figure who is never seen and whose sole desire is to make money. 'In Europe, when I was known as a person, the world was disgusted by me, and I was disgusted by the world. Now I'm no longer a person and the world is simply a tool to be used.'

Drowning City takes us into a world where we can see how politics and economics affect the lives of the little people. It is more than just an action novel. The Depression is seen in overview and through the eyes of a person who starts on the wrong side of the law.

As a first novel, from an author who completed the first draft of the novel when he was 17, *Drowning City* lays the foundation for what could be outstanding work in the future. He has had the courage to interpret history through contemporary eyes and then present us with a novel from an unexpected perspective.