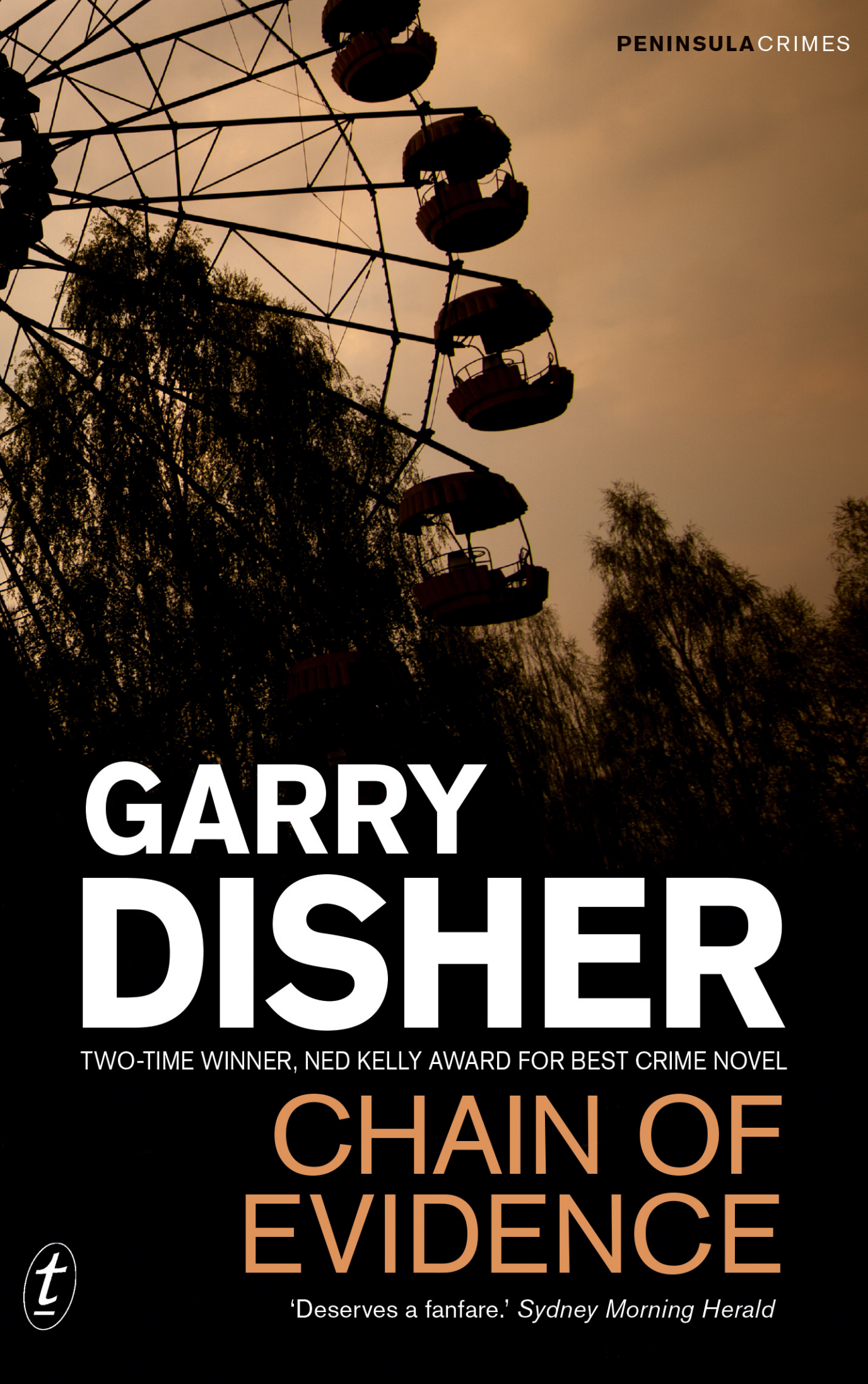


PENINSULA CRIMES

# GARRY DISHER

TWO-TIME WINNER, NED KELLY AWARD FOR BEST CRIME NOVEL

# CHAIN OF EVIDENCE

'Deserves a fanfare.' *Sydney Morning Herald*

# 1

Down here in Victoria he was the Rising Stars Agency, but he'd been Catwalk Casting up in New South Wales, and Model Miss Promotions in Queensland before that. Pete Duyker figured that he had another three months on the Peninsula before the cops and the Supreme Court caught up with him again, obliging him to move on.

'Gorgeous,' he said, firing off a few shots with the Nikon that had no film in it but was bulky and professional-looking, and emitted all of the expected clicks and whirs. For his other work he was strictly digital.

The mother simpered. 'Yeth,' she said, reminding Pete of that old Carry On movie, the doctor with his stethoscope saying 'Big breaths' and the tarty teenager in his consulting room saying, 'Yeth, and I'm only thixteen.' He fired off a few more shots of the woman's five-year-old. The brat's lank hair scarcely shifted in the breeze on the top of Arthur's Seat, the waters of the bay and the curve of the Peninsula spreading dramatically behind her, the smog-hazed towers of Melbourne faintly visible to the northwest. 'Just gorgeous,' he reiterated, snapping away.

She wasn't gorgeous. That didn't matter. Plenty of them *were* gorgeous, and had factored in to his plans over the years. This one had skinny legs, knobbly knees, crooked teeth and a ghastly pink gingham

outfit. It hadn't taken Pete very long to figure out that a mother's love is blind, her ambition for her youngster boundless.

'Golden,' Pete said now, fitting a wide-angle lens from one of his camera bags, the bag satisfyingly battered and worn, a working photographer's gear. 'That last shot was golden.'

The mother beamed, a bony anorexic in skin-tight jeans, brilliant white T-shirt, huge, smoky shades and high-heeled sandals, her nod to the springtime balminess here on the Peninsula. Hers was the ugly face of motherhood, the greed naked. She was seeing a portfolio of flattering shots of her kid and the television work that would flow from it, all for a once-only, up-front charge of $395 plus a $75 registration fee. In about a week's time she'd start to get antsy and call his mobile, but Pete had several mobile phones, all of them untraceable clones and throwaways.

He looked at his watch. He'd led her to believe that he had to rush back to Melbourne now, to update a client's portfolio, the kid who played little Bethany in that Channel 10 soap, 'A Twist in Time'.

'You'll hear from me by next Friday,' he lied.

'Thankth,' said the mother as the kid scratched her calf and Pete Duyker drove off in his white Tarago van, erasing them from his mind.

The time was 2.45, a Thursday afternoon in late September. The primary school in Waterloo got out at 3.15, so he was cutting it fine. There was always Friday, and the weekend, but the latter was risky, and besides, the impulse was on him now, fine and urgent, so it had to be today.

He drove on, heading across to the Westernport side of the Peninsula, winding through townships and farmland, many of the hillsides terraced with vineyards and orchards. Not entirely unspoilt, he thought, spotting an ugly great faux-Tuscan mansion, and here and there whole stands of gum trees looked dead. Pete racked his brains: 'dieback' it was called. Some kind of disease. But the thought didn't dent his equilibrium, not on such a clear, still day, the air perfumed and the Peninsula giddy with springtime growth all around him:

orchard blossom, weeds, tall grass going to seed beside the road, the bottlebrush flowering.

He reached the coastal plain and soon he was in Waterloo. Pete was a bit of a sociologist. He liked to get the feel of a place before he went active, and he already knew Waterloo to be a town of extremes: rich and poor, urban and rural, privileged and disadvantaged. You didn't see the wealthy very often. They lived in converted farmhouses or architectural nightmares a few kilometres outside town or on bluffs overlooking the bay. The poor lived in small brick and weatherboard houses behind the town's couple of shopping streets, and in newer but still depressing housing estates on the town's perimeter. You didn't see the poor buying ride-on mowers, reins and bridles, lucerne hay or $30 bottles of the local pinot noir: they ate at McDonald's, bought Christmas presents in the $2 shops, drove huge old inefficient V8s. They didn't cycle, jog or attend the gym but presented to the local surgeries with long-untreated illnesses brought on by bad diets, alcohol and drug abuse, or injuries from hard physical labour in the nearby refinery or on some rich guy's boutique vineyard. They were the extremes. There were a lot of people who ticked over nicely, thank you, because the state or local governments employed them, or because rich and poor alike depended on them.

Earlier in the week Pete had driven into town via the road that skirted the mangrove flats, but today he drove right through the centre of Waterloo, slowly down High Street, reflecting, spotting changes and tendencies, making connections. He wouldn't mind betting the new gourmet deli might flourish, but wasn't surprised to see For Sale signs in the camping and electronic shops, not with a new K-Mart in the next block. It made him mad, briefly. His instincts were to support the little man.

He drove on, passing a couple of pharmacies, a health food shop, bakery, ANZ bank, travel agency, Salvation Army op-shop, the library and shire offices, and finally High Street opened onto the foreshore reserve: extensively treed parkland, picnic tables, skateboard ramps, a

belt of mangroves skirting the bay, and an area given over to the annual Waterloo Show, not busy today but all of the rides and sideshows would be in full swing on the weekend.

Pete passed the Show, making for the far end of the reserve, where he parked beside a toilet block that he'd scouted out earlier in the week: grimy brick, odiferous, no disguising what it was. He went in, checked that he was alone, and changed into a grey wig, grey paste-on moustache, white lab coat and black horn rims with clear lenses. Then he drove to Trevally Street and parked where the sunlight through the plane trees cast transfiguring patterns over himself and his van. He wasn't a smoker, but had been known to toss other men's cigarette butts at a scene, to throw off the cops.

Now Pete waited. He waited by the van's open door, a clipboard in his hand. Time passed. Maybe she had detention, or after-school care, or was dawdling on the playground. He walked to the corner and back. Surely she'd be along soon, dreamily pumping the pedals of her bike, helmet crooked on her gleaming curls, backpack bumping against her downy spine.

Of course, she might not come, but twice now he'd watched her take this detour after school. Rather than ride straight home she had made her way along Trevally and down to the waterfront reserve, to the magic of the Waterloo Show, with its dodgem cars, Ferris wheel, the Mad Mouse ride, the Ghost Train, fairy floss on a stick. The Show was a magnet to all kinds of kids, but Pete had chosen only one kid. He paced up and down, the van door partly open, listening to the bees in some nearby roses.

But then she appeared. Just as he'd imagined. He stood and waited as she approached.

Finally she was upon him and he stepped into her path, saying, 'Your mum was taken ill. She wants me to take you to her.'

She gave him a doubting frown, and quite rightly, too, but his lab coat spelt doctor, nurse or ambulance officer, and he was counting on her natural impulse to be at her mother's side. 'It's all right,' he said,

glancing both ways along the street, 'hop in.' If necessary, he'd show her the fish-gutting knife.

She dismounted prettily from the bike and her slender fingers played at her arched throat, undoing the buckle of her helmet. Pete was overcome. When she got into a fluster with the helmet, her backpack and a small electronic toy she had hanging from a strap around her neck, he itched to help her get untangled.

'Would you like a drink?' he said, when she was buckled into the seatbelt and bike, bag and helmet were on board. They'd both forgotten the toy, which lay on the grassy verge alongside a crooked brick fence. 'Lemonade,' he explained, shaking an old sports drink bottle. 'Do you like lemonade?'

She took the bottle. He watched the motions of her throat. 'Thirsty girl,' he said approvingly.

He started the engine. He could see that she would start to fret before the Temazepam took effect. She'd want to know where her mother was and where he was taking her.

But, astoundingly, that didn't happen this time. 'Oh, what a cute puppy,' she gushed.

Puppy? What puppy? Pete followed her gaze, and sure enough, some mutt of a dog lay curled on the old sleeping bag he kept in the back, one drowsy eye on the girl. It beat its tail sleepily, gave a shuddering sigh.

Must have jumped in when my back was turned, Pete thought. He assessed things rapidly. If he ejected the dog now, he'd upset the girl. The dog would ease the girl's mind. Ergo…

'Where are you taking me?'

'To see your mum.'

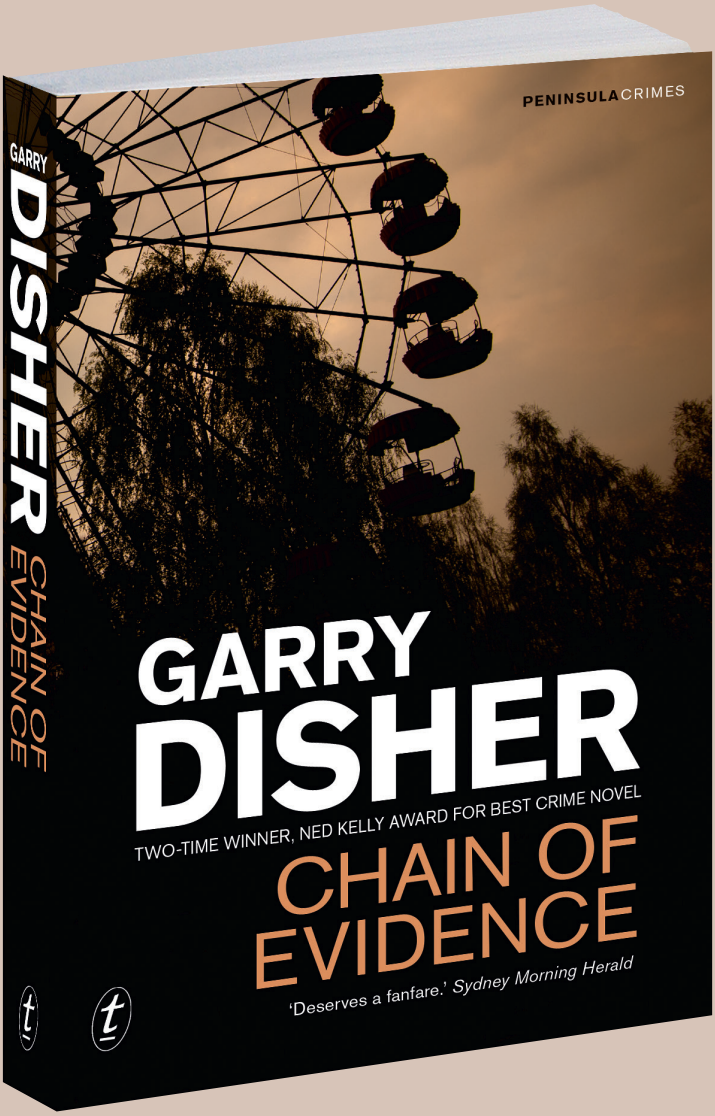
Frown. 'But she went up to Melbourne,' the kid said, as if she'd only just remembered it. 'To the races. She'll be back late.'

'She had an accident on the freeway,' Pete said.

The girl didn't buy it. 'Let me out,' she mumbled, already feeling the Temazepam.

They were clear of the leafy grove by now and on the access road, with cars, kids wobbling home on their bikes and a knot of people yarning and eating ice creams at the bench seats outside the only corner shop in this part of Waterloo. Pete concentrated. The girl, fading rapidly, turned heavy eyes to her side window and mouthed 'Help me' at Mrs Elliott, the library aide at her school, who had stopped by for a litre of milk. Mrs Elliott gave her a cheery wave and disappeared, and soon Pete had, too.

That was Thursday.

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