

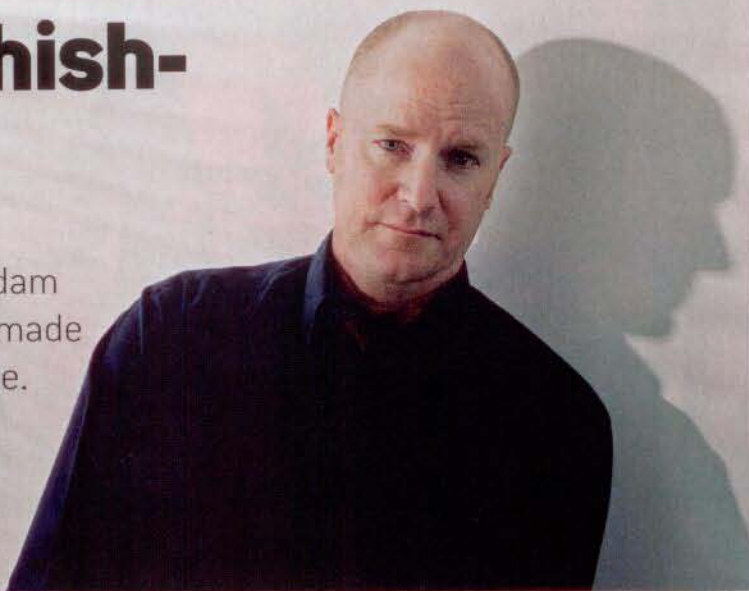
## FIRST PERSON

AS TOLD TO REBECCA MARTIN

stm@sundaytimes.news1td.com.au

# David Whish-Wilson

Meeting the son of murdered brothel madam Shirley Finn in prison made this writer turn to crime.



**I'VE SEEN REAL KILLINGS,** so I have a very healthy respect for violence. It's not something that I want to use as a plot for selling novels.

When I was about 18 or 19, I was travelling in East Africa. It was an interesting time in Africa – society was undergoing rapid change.

I saw maybe a couple of dozen murders. It seemed natural for them there, but it was shocking for someone from Australia. But I didn't have a way of making sense of what I had seen.

I started using writing as a way to try and understand it.

The motivation really seemed to be about business. One of the paradoxical things I've discovered is that men can be extremely violent in matters of business, but can be good people in many other ways.

I was born in Newcastle. My dad was in the RAAF and I lived all over Australia, including Perth.

In the '90s, my wife and I moved back to Perth where I started a philosophy and literature course, and teaching creative writing.

I met a guy who was teaching harmonica at the prison and it seemed like a good idea, so I called up and volunteered at Casuarina.

I didn't know about the brothel

madam Shirley Finn – I was quite young when she was murdered. I met Shane Finn, her son, at Casuarina and got to know him.

Shane gave me the police file on Shirley that he had been given by a sympathetic policeman and said, "Do something with this".

Talking to people who had known Shirley, including her partner, they all pointed out the big gaps in the investigation [of the murder] and that the subsequent Norris Royal Commission into prostitution and police was a whitewash.

It made me even more curious.

I talked to one policeman at the time, a junior detective in CIB, who commented that it was commonly known that there was police involvement. But it was felt that to ask any questions would invite negative attention.

There was not enough on the public record to write a non-fiction book about it.

However, having taught Aboriginal studies at Curtin, I was interested in the way our indigenous writers use fiction to get at the truth, to write into the gaps on the historical record. It's a writer's modus operandi to use fiction to create a sense of emotional truth.

So while *Line of Sight* is fiction

based on a true story, it's a thriller that will satisfy those who don't know the Shirley Finn story.

It's about crime, but it is not a whodunit. It's more about the danger people are put in for knowing about a crime, which seemed relevant to Shirley Finn. Many people know what happened, but no one can talk.

There aren't many novels set in Perth. I wanted to make the city and the place a character in the book itself and try and get across the things I love about Perth, like the light and the river.

My next book is set in 1979, at the time of the 150th anniversary of colonisation of Perth, on the cusp of the cowboy capitalism of the 1980s and when the drug culture became more entrenched. It's another crime novel, looking at the links between mining, politics and drugs.

I was recently asked what makes crime in Perth so different. My answer was gold mining, and the way gold was used as a means for laundering. And shonky police.

I've talked to people who did business here in that period. They all say it was a crazy place to do business. Some of the stories, you just wouldn't believe them.

**▶ *Line of Sight*, Viking, \$29.95, is out now.**