

## A relaxing read down memory lane

Chris Bonnor

If you are somewhat oldish, you'll remember school inspectors. I knew some as a kid because my schoolteacher father was inspected many times – sometimes a brutal and maybe brutalising experience. Maybe things improved over time. Yes, even in the 1980s some needed a personality transplant, but others were outstanding. Laurie Dicker fell into the latter category, polite, personable and professional, with a boundless energy which still serves him well, having just written four books in as many years.

Laurie's books, which are all available from online suppliers such as Booktopia, Book Depository or Amazon, include:

- *Harry The Ant Nest*, Dicker Books, 2019
- *Harry The Target*, Dicker Books, 2020
- *Harry Amazing Grace*, Dicker Books, 2022
- *Dust, Dags, Drongos and Flies - Bush Yarns from the Outback*, Dicker Books, 2nd Edition 2022.

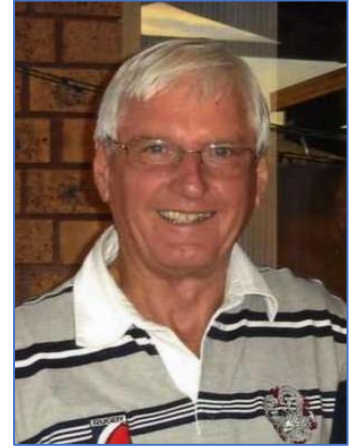
His books are set in the early post-war years with detective Harry Taylor in hot pursuit of evil doers, in the face of the odds thrown up by the crims and by the police hierarchy – sometimes one and the same. Taylor had emerged from a busy war with a few bruises and a record second to none, something he doesn't want to talk about. Some of Dicker's other characters battled as much after the war as during, the trauma often playing havoc with their family and community lives.

The first book is set in Goonaburra, a fictional central west country town, maybe created to protect the innocent. Even if you've only lingered in such places, the setting will raise a smile. If you have lived west of the sandstone curtain, then Dicker's characters will be quite familiar. The second book plays out in Sydney when someone takes a potshot at Harry and he becomes immersed in a world of sex, drugs, colourful racing identities and corrupt coppers – decades before all that became rather endemic in the 'big smoke'. The setting for the third book will be familiar to anyone from the Riverina. If you didn't ever live in Wagga Wagga you must have passed through it.

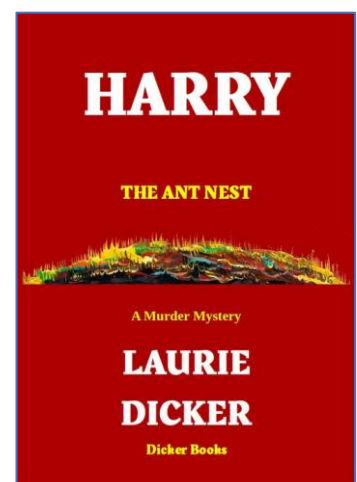
Detective Harry is a good man and a brave and honest cop. He isn't flawless and we get a good insight into who and what he is. Some other characters who float in and out (and keep coming back) are a bit two dimensional, quite noticeably in the first book. On the other hand, my experience of the 1950s was that people tended to be two-dimensional – any third dimension was something they wouldn't share and maybe wasn't spoken about in conservative communities.

The first book especially includes a lot of light-hearted banter between the main characters, seemingly a preferred alternative to, or substitute for, any deeper and more meaningful exchange. Hence as a depiction of the late 1940s Dicker's representation of the post-war era is arguably very real.

And the characters came with a suite of colloquialisms and favourite sayings, derived from anything from the bush to the Bible. Some will think this is a bit over the top, but that is what the baby boomers grew up with. There were throw-away lines about everything - and everyone, because they enabled easy dismissal of those who were different and had no place in mainstream Australia. They fuelled ingrained prejudices about gypsies, the Chinese, migrants, Indigenous Australians, anyone non-heterosexual or perhaps too nerdy – with bullying reinforcing the boundaries between them and the rest of 'us'. To his credit



Laurie Dicker



Dicker's 'Harry' does his best to soften some of the extreme expressions of this, walking the line between the dominating ethos (including in the police force) and various outsiders.

An illustration of the power of the hegemonic cultures is found in the names of his characters. Everyone has a first name but in post-war rural Australia boys and men were also consigned a nickname, which you often had to carry through life. Hence Dicker's characters include 'Nipper' Rickets, 'Spud' Murphy, 'Hoppy' Thomas and his father, 'Spanner'. With a biology/science teaching father my nickname was 'Spec', as in specimens ... get it?

None of this suggests that Dicker's books lack depth. Quite the reverse. Other than the aftermath of the war, there are quite a few other themes which are often close to the surface: the presence and power of the church, the complexities of law enforcement, the apparent simplicity of rural life, with the blokes definitely in the ascendancy. And the differences between men and women, not just because men drank beer, often in excess (and in pubs, only until 6pm), and women (apparently) drank pink gin. The women in the books emerged from the war multiskilled and increasingly confident after doing 'men's work' on the home front for years ... thereafter expected to somehow retreat to a more subdued existence.

Obviously the books aren't meant to be a 'contemporary' social study, they are all good yarns. It took me the first book to get into the stride but the second and third books really kept me interested and engaged. Sure, some of the current swag of 'rural noir' writers might be better known, but both Laurie Dicker and his Harry are authentic characters who reflect the culture of earlier times better than the 'flashbacks' created by other writers ... who weren't around in the times they portray.

For that reason alone, those of us who are 'oldies' will especially warm to Dicker's characters and the places where they lived. I had an extra bonus, I grew up and spent half my career in Laurie Dicker's country, the Riverina, the semi-arid country and the central west. Laurie injects the culture and character of all those places into his books. Even the city names and places resonated – in the 1950s any young kid could be set loose to explore the big smoke. These places form a big part of the living memory of baby boomers. I hope they enjoy Harry's adventures.

**Further info:** You can read more about Laurie and his books on his website: [Dicker Books](#)

### Contributor details

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Chris was Principal of Asquith Boys High (1991-2000), NSWSPC Futures Principal (2001), Principal of Davidson High (2002-2005) and NSWSPC President (2002-2006). He is now a writer and advocate. Chris is also a NSWSPC Life Member and was awarded his AM in 2007.

Chris grew up (and taught) in Tumut and lived and/or taught at various times in Harden, Tamworth, Bega, Cootamundra, Leeton and Lake Cargelligo.

**P.S.** I couldn't avoid a wry smile at some of Dicker's possible errors, and there weren't many. He located Brandy Marys swimming hole on the Tumut River quite close to Talbingo, while it is much closer to Tumut – and now under the Blowering Dam wall. And he had Harry driving, in 1948, between Sydney and Wagga in around six hours. CB

