

Alan Whelan wants a word

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Selling *The Lockdown Tales – Emergence*

I'll start by saying *The Lockdown Tales – Emergence* is a good book. It's better than the first volume, *The Lockdown Tales*, which is also good. But *Emergence* is funnier, deeper in its presentation of human relationships, recognising the sadness of the world and the comedy too, and still finding its way to a hopeful conclusion. In music and in every other art we like the journey from darkness into light.

I'm proud of it. I hadn't written it I'd have been happy to find it and read it.

But I sold *The Lockdown Tales*'s paper copies by setting up and running a stall in Glebe, Newtown's King Street and occasionally Katoomba. I sold enough to cover all my production expenses and make a profit. It was also a nice ego boost, because people who'd bought the book would come up later and tell me how much they'd enjoyed it.

This time I set up my stall in Glebe, and was there from mid-morning to five for most of two weeks, and Didn't Sell A Single Copy. I tried again in Katoomba for several days, and sold two. So that was discouraging. I've sold a few more by word of mouth, but as David Hume said of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, "it fell deadborn from the press."



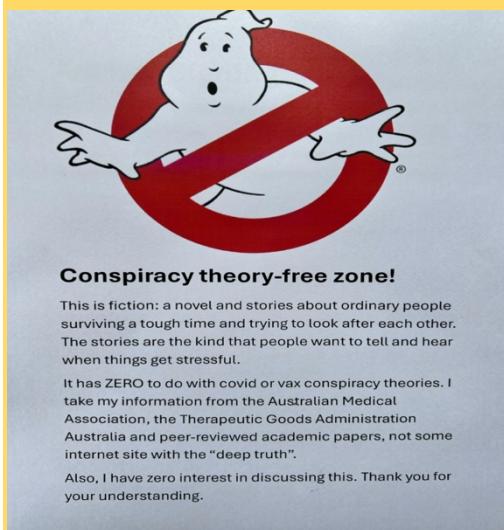
I've tried to think why the two closely similar books (I mean the framework; the stories are all different) should meet such different commercial fortunes. My two theories:

- 1 Lockdown fatigue: When I was selling the first book people were going out, shopping, having coffees and socialising for the first time in a couple of years. So a book set in the midst of the recent weirdness was an interesting novelty. But the second (and final) volume, *The Lockdown Tales – Emergence*, came out when there was more distance from the lockdown, and a general wish to put it firmly into the past and forget that it ever happened.
- 2 Conspiracy theories: There's a lot of perpetually angry people who are filthy about things like the faked moon landing, the way the 2020 US election was won by fraud, the cover-up of alien abductions, the communists running the Department of Education and no doubt the state cover-up of the hole in Antarctica that leads to the underside of the flat earth.

They started to organise internationally over the vaccines, vaccination in general, the refusal to reveal that Covid was a hoax *and* a dangerous government weapon to achieve mind control by injecting people with nanobot technology *and* a weapon of biological warfare. They also decided that the lockdown, sheeple, was a sinister experiment by the state to see how its citizens would put up with coercion.

When I wrote it my title, *The Lockdown Tales*, seemed merely descriptive. It means some tales that people told each other during the lockdown. But since those innocent days lockdown has become a trigger word.

A book called *The Lockdown Tales* now sounds like it might be about the tales, the lies, behind the lockdown. Most people are not conspiracy theorists, and if they see a book that seems like it might be full of arm-waving and *just-join-the-dots,-people!* they'll avoid the author's eye and pass on.



The title also meant that the street's vaccine "truthers" thought I was one of them, and I kept finding myself in conversation with people who didn't want to buy a copy but did want to tell me the latest revelation about The Conspiracy. I made this sign.

They're mostly lonely, obsessed people, and getting rid of them without shouting takes ages. You know that while they're there nobody sane who has a credit card or money in their pocket will want to be anywhere near you.

So *The Lockdown Tales – Emergence* was an innocent title, as innocuous as *The Canterbury Tales*, when the book went to the publisher. By the time it was out the language had changed and the word “lockdown” had become a red flag. Not all writers’ luck is going to be good luck. Sometimes the bear eats you.

Anyway, I’m going to keep marketing *The Lockdown Tales* and *The Lockdown Tales – Emergence*, this time working more on the e-book side of things. If I can drive up more interest I’ll go back and do some street stalls. They *can* be fun.

Writing The Gap

The Gap is the story of Heike Kingsepp, whose politician father is murdered by the Nazis when they invade Estonia in 1941. His mother runs with him to Latvia, where they live under assumed identities until she is found and murdered by the Russian occupiers in 1946. He has flee alone, aged 14, eventually winding up in Australia. There Heike gets involved in migrant and refugee activism.

He hires a lot of refugees from the Baltic states in his carpentry business. One is Valdis, a young gay man, rejected by both 1980s Australian culture and his Latvian parents’ culture. Valdis goes to The Gap to think about jumping, and Heike chases him to talk him out of it. But when they’re there, the group of off-duty cops who were murdering gays at that time see them, assume it’s an assignation and throw them both over The Gap.

It’s also the story of Carys Hughes, who works at a factory because she can’t afford to go to university, and who is attracted to Heike. She courts and marries him, and they have a son, Phil. A year after Heike’s death she learns that he was murdered by NSW police, and that the names of the individuals responsible are known. Heike was popular, and a group of mostly East European migrants are prepared to have those cops killed if she’ll just say the word.

She’s tempted. What does she do? Spoilers end here.

Writing it is surprisingly, encouragingly easy. 51,000 words in six weeks is fast, for me, and it feels like good stuff.

Writer’s luck

The story placed Heike in an Australian refugee/migrant camp in 1953. To write that section I researched the conditions, buildings, facilities and general appearance of the Bunnerong Migrant Camp.

I discovered that the shacks for refugees there were old naval storage sheds. They weren’t made for occupation. The Menzies Government, at the direction of the Minister for Immigration, Harold “Memorial Swimming Pool” Holt, gave control of the camps to a specially formed private company called Commonwealth Hostels Ltd.

When the refugees and migrants at Bunnerong started complaining that:

- family life was impossible if they could only eat in the military-style mess hall with over 1,000 other people, and they wanted to be able to buy and prepare their own food in their homes and eat as a family; and
- The army-surplus-style food was bloody awful and overpriced

– the company didn't respond. They knew that the power supply in the homes was inadequate: if you tried to boil a kettle and run a heater at once you'd blow a fuse. Fixing that would mean the sheds would have to be rewired to allow for human occupation. The rewiring would cut into profits. Also, they were making a good return on selling the army food.



So many of the residents went on a tariff strike. They continued paying the rent for their accommodation (a court later found that the rent they were charged was excessive), but refused to eat or pay the tariff for the mess hall food.

The company responded fast. They evicted 32 families (about 150 people) including people with disabilities and an eight-month pregnant woman, then evicted another 87 families soon afterwards. These people had nowhere to go so they lived in a tent village just outside the camp. Eventually, about half of them pooled their money, bought land in Malabar and set up a cooperative to build new homes.

It's a great story! And I can involve my MC (main character) in it! I had no idea, when I placed him in that camp at that time, that any of that had happened.

Writers' luck can be good luck. Sometimes you eat the bear.

Solemn promise:

I will never write *Twilight* fan fiction, or fan fiction of any kind. I'll never write a book in which these two words constitute a paragraph:

He grinned.

I can also promise you that I'll never write a detective story. That's inability more than disdain for the genre. I like reading the character stuff, though I never care who killed Hanratty. I *could* write one about, say, adultery or mountain-climbing with a character who happens, when he or she is at work, to be a detective.

Reading: The Girl Who...

I came upon these rather late, but I've recently enjoyed reading Stieg Larsson's *the Girl Who... Millenium* trilogy. Each one is slightly inferior to the one before, and the third volume, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, contains some long, eye-glazing pages of info-dumping.

So much so that I started thinking about how I'd have handled it so that didn't have to happen. Up to then I had no complaints or doubts in his tale-telling.

But they are still very good.

Social media

I'm going to go on more social media platforms, he announced gaily in his last newsletter. Well, he hasn't. He gets a bit obsessive about writing, sometimes, and hasn't taken the time to expand his Empire of Power, not even unto Instagram and Mastodon.

It will happen more slowly, in the margins as I do other things.

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