

BOOK CLUB NOTES

***Burn Patterns*, Ron Elliott (Fremantle Press)**

Summary

Iris Foster is working as a narrative psychologist in a private practice when a firebomb explodes at a nearby school. She's worked for the police and fire service before and has become known as the 'Fire Lady.' She's not entirely comfortable with this moniker or the publicity because she's still recovering from her own personal trauma, and trying to keep her marriage on track.

But the fire changes everything. The intelligence and the murderousness of the attack take the services by surprise, and Iris is called in to help although she's not entirely trusted. An arrest is made and Iris meets the suspect and looks for clues. When a second fire attack happens, and then a third, it's clear that the perpetrator has an understanding of fire that goes beyond that of the normal arsonist. With the attacks bringing Iris's trauma to the surface, and the identity of the murderer and the location of the next bomb unclear, the race is on to stop the fires before a final act of mass murder takes place.

About the Author

Ron Elliott has worked as a scriptwriter, director and has lectured in screen arts at Curtin University. He has written for *Home and Away*, *Bush Patrol*, *Ship to Shore* and many more children's television series, and his directorial credits include the feature film *Justice*. His first novel, *Spinner* (Fremantle Press) was described by *The Age* as 'a great yarn', and his follow-up collection of 'mini-novels', *Now Showing*, was described by *The Daily Telegraph* as 'compelling, with punchy dialogue ... all with twists and turns and the pace of cinematic thrillers'.

Questions for Discussion

- A good writer populates his/her story with what John Gardner has called 'details like clues' – specific concrete details that make for a vivid and immersive reading experience but also layer a story with meaning. How does Iris Foster's closely observed reading of her patients function in this way? What character 'truths' are revealed in her observations, truths that are in many cases hidden from the patients themselves?
- In the same way, how are the various aspects of Iris's earlier trauma visited upon her, despite her best efforts to conceal them, and how does she deal with them?

- Given that this is a crime novel, what is the thematic importance of Iris's use of narrative therapy in terms of Iris and her characters (re)constructing their own stories in the face of fractured identities, and realities that threaten to overwhelm them? What does it say about identity in general, and how we all cope with threatening realities?
- How would you describe Iris and her husband Mathew's relationship, in terms of Iris's vulnerability and the silences and secrets that are implicit in their marriage? How are some of the more performative aspects of identity played out in this particular domestic setting, and for what reason?
- What symbolic role does fire play in *Burn Patterns*, in the context of the characters' desires and behaviours?
- Iris is called the Fire Lady, but it's a term that carries layered meaning and ambiguity. Why is Iris's specialisation suspect in the eyes of others, in a way that it isn't for Charles Koch? Does this have anything to do with gender?
- Both Iris and Charles are looked upon as obsessive and therefore unstable. How does this obsessiveness relate to the unfolding of the plot and the unmasking of the killer?
- *Burn Patterns* is a very well-researched book. What did you learn about fire and the people who use fire as a weapon? How are they different to other serious offenders?
- What aspects of *Burn Patterns* conform to the conventional crime narrative in terms of characterisation and plot, and the effect that these two aspects have on suspense and resolution, and what aspects are different, and why do you think this might be the case?

If you liked this book you might also like

Now Showing, Ron Elliott (Fremantle Press)

Prime Cut, *Getting Warmer*, & *Bad Seed*, Alan Carter (Fremantle Press)

Sweet One, Peter Docker (Fremantle Press)

Line of Sight & *Zero at the Bone*, David Whish-Wilson (Penguin Australia)