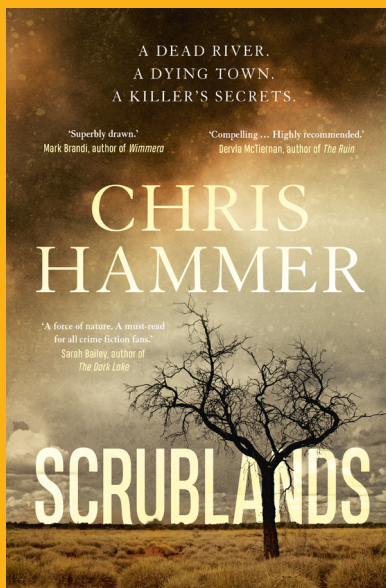




# ALLEN & UNWIN'S

## *Book Group Guide*

### Conversation Starters



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Welcome to Allen & Unwin's Book Group Guide for *Scrublands* by Chris Hammer!

## About the book

**Set in a fictional Riverina town at the height of a devastating drought, *Scrublands* is one of the most powerful, compelling and original crime novels to be written in Australia.**

In an isolated country town brought to its knees by endless drought, a charismatic and dedicated young priest calmly opens fire on his congregation, killing five parishioners before being shot dead himself.

A year later, troubled journalist Martin Scarsden arrives in Riversend to write a feature on the anniversary of the tragedy. But the stories he hears from the locals about the priest and incidents leading up to the shooting don't fit with the accepted version of events his own newspaper reported in an award-winning investigation. Martin can't ignore his doubts, nor the urgings of some locals to unearth the real reason behind the priest's deadly rampage.

Just as Martin believes he is making headway, a shocking new development rocks the town, which becomes the biggest story in Australia. The media descends on Riversend and Martin is now the one in the spotlight. His reasons for investigating the shooting have suddenly become very personal.

Wrestling with his own demons, Martin finds himself risking everything to discover a truth that becomes darker and more complex with every twist. But there are powerful forces determined to stop him, and he has no idea how far they will go to make sure the town's secrets stay buried.

## About the author



Credit: Mike Bowers

Chris Hammer was a journalist for more than thirty years, dividing his career between covering Australian federal politics and international affairs. For many years he was a roving foreign correspondent for SBS TV's flagship current affairs program *Dateline*. He has reported from more than thirty countries on six continents. In Canberra, roles included chief political correspondent for *The Bulletin*, current affairs correspondent for SBS TV and a senior political journalist for *The Age*.

His first book, *The River*, published in 2010 to critical

acclaim, was the recipient of the ACT Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Walkley Book Award and the Manning Clark House National Cultural Award.

Chris has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Charles Sturt University and a master's degree in international relations from the Australian National University. He lives in Canberra with his wife, Dr Tomoko Akami. The couple have two children.

## Praise for *Scrublands*

'A superbly drawn, utterly compelling evocation of a small town riven by a shocking crime.' Mark Brandi, author of *Wimmera*

'A clever, intricate mystery ... a complex, compelling story deeply rooted in its small-town setting. Highly recommended.' Dervla McTiernan, author of *The Ruin*

'*Scrublands* kidnapped me for 48 hours. I was hopelessly lost in the scorching Australian landscape, disoriented but completely immersed in the town and people of Riversend, as the heat crackled off the pages. I was devastated when it was time to go back to the real world. This book is a force of nature. A must-read for all crime fiction fans.' Sarah Bailey, author of *The Dark Lake* and *Into the Night*

'Hammer's portrait of a dying, drought-struck town numbed by a priest's unimaginable act of violence will capture you from the first explosive page and refuse to let go until the last. His remarkable writing takes you inside lives twisted by secrets festering beneath the melting heat of the inland, the scrub beyond waiting to burst into flame. *Scrublands* is the read of the year. Unforgettable.' Tony Wright, Associate Editor and Special Writer, *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*

'A compulsively page-turning thriller where the parched interior looms as large as the characters.' Katharine Murphy, *Guardian Australia*

'A brilliant read. A thriller that crackles and sweats and a powerful portrait of a small town on the edge.' Michael Brissenden, author of *The List*

'Impressive prose and brilliant plotting ... a remarkable study of human fallibility, guilt, remorse, hope and redemption. The descriptions of landscape are often evocative and Winton-like, with the parched country-town setting reminiscent of Jane Harper's *The Dry* ... It is hard to imagine *Scrublands* not being loved by all crime/mystery fans. FIVE STARS.' Scott Whitmont, *Bookseller and Publisher*

## Note from the author

**A journalist for over thirty years, here's Chris to explain how he came to the story:**

At the height of the millennial drought, I travelled through inland Australia researching my non-fiction book *The River*. It really got under my skin: the landscape, the people, the desperation. Time and again I encountered stories of death and heartache, of hope and resilience. It stayed with me.

Inevitably, it became the setting as a complex crime story began bubbling away in my mind. Not just one crime, not just two but ... Yet I also wanted to tell a story that was more than a series of plot points; I wanted compromised characters, struggling to survive, just like the town itself. And I wanted that sense of unending drought. *Scrublands* is the result.

## Conversation starters

- ☞ In the first chapter, Chris Hammer places us with Martin in Riversend. What were your initial thoughts of the town? How did Martin's initial descriptions of Riversend impact your ideas about the people who live there and the events that took place?
- ☞ Despite being set in a fictional town, *Scrublands* has a strong sense of place. What elements does Chris Hammer include to achieve this?
- ☞ Martin provides the reader with an insight into the life of a journalist. What did you learn?
- ☞ What did you think of the arrival of more media in Riversend and their response to Martin?
- ☞ Who was your favourite character in the book and why? (Check out Chris Hammer's response to this question here <https://bit.ly/2LyN97P>).
- ☞ How do you think Martin's own demons impacted his time in Riversend?
- ☞ What assumptions at the beginning of the novel did you think could not be true?
- ☞ Did any of the twists and turns surprise you?
- ☞ What did you think of the ending of the book? Were all your questions answered?

## If you liked this book ...

May we suggest the following:

*The Dark Lake* by Sarah Bailey

*Into the Night* by Sarah Bailey

