FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Death at Victoria Dock
Kerry Greenwood
Poisoned Pen Press
978-1-59058-245-9
(November 30, 2006)

In the author's Phryne Fisher mysteries, the chaser is infinitely more engaging than the chase. For the benefit of those not yet acquainted with her charms, Fisher is a rich, stylish, sexually liberated PI who plies her trade in Melbourne, Australia, during the late 1920s. She is—to coin the most obvious phrase—an unflappable flapper, one whose boldness could make a Jay Gatsby blanch. (And like Gatsby, her current opulence conceals a background of severe deprivation.)

There are two puzzles Fisher must attend to as this buoyantly breezy tale unwinds. The first is forced on her by accident—chancing upon the shooting of a handsome young Latvian immigrant (who dies in her arms barely three pages into the book). The second, which she is hired to solve, involves the disappearance of the teenage daughter of a wealthy businessman, a luckless chap who is additionally plagued by a rebellious son (the missing girl's twin brother) and the unmet desires of his second and much younger wife.

It soon becomes clear that the Latvian's death is somehow connected with the political struggles of the local dockworkers, whose ranks have been infiltrated by an array of leftwing factions ranging from communists to anarchists. Some of the latter, it turns out, aspire to further their cause by violent bank robbery. While pursuing this lead and that, Fisher, whose fuse is short in the best of times, is beset by yet another indignity—the kidnapping of Dot, her loyal and long-suffering maid.

So how's a lady to satisfy her, um, frolicsome needs amid such distracting clamor? Rest assured—Phryne manages. Greenwood offers a glimpse of the detective's free spirit when Fisher realizes she has bloodied her blouse in the course of comforting the shooting victim. Without the slightest hesitation, she marches over to a nearby guard post and demands that the watchman, Tom, hold her fur coat while she assesses the damage to her wardrobe: "Unable to bear the cold sogginess of clotting blood on her skin, Phryne tore the silk shirt bodily away from the seam in one swift, brutal movement. The astonished Tom saw revealed blood-blotched breasts as pale as good china."

Elsewhere, Greenwood all but shouts that Fisher is a serial gamboler: "Phryne subsided

back into his arms, sated and sleepy and pleased that he was not going to recoil in that inexplicable way some men did" and, "[She] dressed quickly, a skill learned in many a cold Monmarte studio."

Greenwood, the author of thirty-eight novels (eighteen featuring Phryne Fisher) and six nonfiction books, has received the Ned Kelly Lifetime Achievement Award from the Crime Writers' Association of Australia. Her attention to historical detail—from the mechanical intricacies of Phryne's plush motorcars to the workings of the deadly Lewis machine gun—adds immeasurably to the tone of the narrative. Fisher is a keeper.