

Spinifex: The Curse of the Night Parrot

John Grant

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In the mystery novel Spinifex, a naturalist is murdered in the vibrant Australian Outback.

In John Grant's engrossing mystery novel *Spinifex*, a naturalist searching for an elusive parrot is murdered in the Australian Outback.

Butler is a beleaguered senior field officer for the wildlife service who is constrained by a bureaucratic boss. He is tempted to go rogue in his efforts to stop traffickers. Then Elder, a controversial adventurer, photographs a night parrot—a bird thought to be near extinction, and which Butler is fascinated by. The photograph leads to arguments about how best to protect the species. When Elder is killed, and Butler is revealed to have been the last person to see him alive, Butler is forced to work with a coworker, Jake, to learn the truth. The men's rapport is based on a mutual tendency to resist the rules, leading them to undertake their independent inquiries. Their conversations are forthright, if at first reserved; they come to respect one another in time.

Queensland and its surroundings are made fascinating through rich details about their flora, fauna, weather, and atmospheres, all of which Butler and other characters feel tied to. And the issues related to the night parrot's rediscovery illustrate tensions between state agencies, private conservationists, and academic researchers, whose different approaches lead to brewing problems. They combat issues like lucrative illegal trades and are suspicious of those who engage in sideline deals; this extends to those who ostensibly work on behalf of local wildlife.

Against this background, the motivations behind Elder's murder are familiar. Still, the investigation proffers surprises as it extends its focus to local aviculture circles, and because of the red herrings used to obscure the culprit's identity. When Butler and Jake become suspects themselves, the suspense increases.

The narrative moves between action scenes and the development of the book's background themes, including about Australia's complicated treatment of Indigenous people. There are both adventures here and insights into life in the Australian bush, with hazy questions about Butler's family origins arising to generate additional interest, as when he meets Jake's relatives, and his own memories of his mother resurface. Sections from an astute woman constable's perspective lead to new clues that advance the case; its developments are often reliant on human connections. Still, though the book's conclusion includes an entertaining manhunt, its ultimate explanations are under developed, and it is too heavy on dialogue.

In the mystery novel *Spinifex*, a naturalist is murdered in the vibrant Australian Outback, leading a government worker into tough inquiries.

KAREN RIGBY (February 4, 2022)

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