



Skin Deep

Gary Kemble

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When washed up journalist Harry Hendrick wakes with a hangover and a strange symbol tattooed on his neck, he shrugs it off as a bad night out.

When more tattoos appear — accompanied by visions of war-torn Afghanistan, bikies, boat people, murder, bar fights and a mysterious woman — he begins to dig a little deeper.

Harry's search leads him to Jess McGrath. She's successful, married; they are drawn to each other though they have nothing in common but unwanted tattoos and high definition nightmares. Together, they edge closer to unearthing the truth behind the sinister disappearance of an SAS hero and his girlfriend Kyla.

There's a federal election looming, with pundits tipping a landslide win for opposition leader Andrew Cardinal. Harry knows there's a link between these disturbing visions and Cardinal's shadowy past, and is compelled to right wrongs, one way or another.

Skin Deep is the thrilling, layered, genre-bending debut novel of Brisbane author and journalist Gary Kemble.

'Gary Kemble's debut novel is an imaginative, fast-paced page-turner that combines crime-writing with a delightful serving of the supernatural.' — Books+Publishing

'With an intense and immediate sense of place, a cracking pace and a great everyman hero, Skin Deep is by turns thrilling and haunting, and will keep readers glued to the page.' — Angela Slatter, Aurealis Award-winning author

Skin Deep Details

Date : Published July 1st 2015 by Echo Publishing

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From Reader Review Skin Deep for online ebook

Nat K says

I really enjoyed this book! Great to read something by an Aussie writer. I liked the twists and turns of the relationship between life weary journo Harry Hendrick and SAS soldier Rob, whose life appears to Harry via flashbacks, nightmares and the mysterious appearance of tattoos, which all tell the story of a grim cover-up, and corruption in high places.

Gregory Totman says

Debut book, from Brisbane author , didn't think I would enjoy ghost like themes yet it's a gripping and suspenseful read .

Karen Brooks says

4.5 stars. The debut novel, *Skin Deep*, by award-winning short story writer, Gary Kemble, published by Echo Publishing (who kindly sent me a review copy – thank you very much) is a ripper of a read. Not being familiar with Kemble's work, I wasn't sure what to expect, especially when the promotional blurb announced the novel was cross-genre. I have had mixed experiences with cross-genre novels (no pun intended) so worried I might be a little disappointed, especially as the blurb set my expectations high. What I read was a page-turning, exceptionally well-written, tale of regret, deception, betrayal, politics, war, corruption at the highest levels and all with a marvellous supernatural bent that evokes time, place and people with richness and depth.

Journalist Harry Hendrick, once a star student at the university where he did his journalism degree, who because of a major mis-step early in his career is stuck working for the a local Brisbane newspaper (having been rejected by all the major ones, including the "Brisbane Mail" – a thinly disguised Courier Mail, the paper for which I've written for over 16 years!). When he wakes one morning after a particularly wild night to find himself sporting an odd tattoo, he is unable to explain when or how he came about it, believing he must have been incredibly wasted not to recall. When other tattoos start appearing on his body, accompanied by vivid and horrific dreams, dreams that include olfactory and taste sensations as well, Harry knows something fantastical is happening to him. But who can he tell? Who would believe him? Not the girlfriend who has just dumped him, the attractive reporter at the Chronicle where he works or his patient boss. As for his best mate, Dave, he's likely to think he's mad. Harry isn't convinced he's not.

When the dreams intensify, and the tattoos appear with alarming regularity, telling their own gruesome version of the events Harry experiences night after night, he understands something major is afoot, something that involves not only the story that almost had him kicked out of university and discredited as a serious journalist years earlier, but one that involves wild and dangerous magic, a desperate desire for revenge and extraordinarily powerful people who will stop at nothing to ensure no-one lives to repeat the tale they've worked so hard to bury.

From the first page, this book gripped and didn't let me go. Kemble is a terrific writer and his evocation of place, particularly, is outstanding. It's not just Brisbane (which I know and love and smelt, felt and imagined as I read), but the surging seas off the coast of Australia, the dry, barren lands of the Middle East and even the interiors of houses and office buildings as well as landscapes. Likewise with people. Harry (along with the other characters in the book) is flesh and blood and his fear and confusion as events overtake him are visceral.

I don't want to say too much for risk of spoiling the plot except to say that this political thriller-cum-action-crime-supernatural novel is fabulous. My only reservation is the cover. I don't think it does justice to the contents and certainly, I never would have picked it up. The title is so apt and tantalising and yet the vague image of smoky squiggles just doesn't cut it for this reader and if it has the same effect of repelling other potential ones, then it's to their detriment as they'd miss out on a great novel. A fantastic debut from a terrific writer. I cannot wait for his next book.

Karen says

A paranormal crime thriller with a blokey sensibility, Skin Deep is set in a Brisbane still dealing with the after-effects of many years of Joh rule.

<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2015/12/22/crime-scene-gary-kemble-sk..>

Cath Ferla says

this was such a great, surprising read. i loved the central protagonist and was hypnotised by the strong sense of place (Brisbane) throughout the story. as a lover of paranormal twists and turns, this story pushed all my buttons and kept me wanting more. a true page turner.

Disclosure: my novel, Ghost Girls, will also be published by Echo Publishing.

Matt Eaton says

Never has the questionable art of injecting ink into one's skin been imbued with so much ominous meaning.

If, like me, you're no fan of tattoos this book is definitely not going to persuade you otherwise, but then that's not what this story is about.

Gary Kemble has come up with an intriguing paranormal crime thriller, the ramifications of which stretch across the world and way back into human history.

The suspense takes a while to build (and the protagonist seems an unlikely member of Gen X given he's 36) but Harry Hendrick is a flawed hero you want to see catch a break, in both life and love.

This, along with the dark forces at work in the background, sets Skin Deep a cut above the usual good guy/bad guy crime story. I'm not sure everything is fully explained, but we learn enough to make this world a place where you want the wrongs to be set right.

My daughter asked me recently whether all motorbike riders were bikies. They are in Skin Deep - and a nasty bunch of cut-throat bastards they are too, daubed voraciously in ink and blood in equal measure.

I was held firmly in the grip of this story right to the end.

Kathryn says

Loved the Brisbane setting, with such familiar suburbs and shopping centres and so on, and the idea had merit, but it went a bit too far down the rabbit hole for me and became too weird. Add to that the frequent swearing, and it wasn't really my cup of tea.

Currently, the lasting effect of this book on me, is that now, as I drive around Brisbane, I notice more tattoo parlours!!

2.5★

Alan Baxter says

This is an excellent debut novel from Gary Kemble. The story is tight, fast-paced and exciting, the characters three-dimensional and believable, and the researched details utterly authentic. A powerful supernatural crime/political thriller. Highly recommended.

Marianne says

Skin Deep is the first book in the Harry Hendrick series by British-born author, Gary Kemble. Harry Hendrick is a journalist for a small time local Brisbane newspaper, The Chermside Chronicle. Stories on traffic black spots, Meals on Wheels, and Chermside Bowls Club are his bread and butter. He's feeling very fragile over the split, after six years living together, from his girlfriend, Bec, and has moved into a long-vacant house on Croydon Street.

When he wakes one Saturday morning, extremely hung-over from his best mate's buck's night, with a strange tattoo on his neck, he puts it down to inebriated bravado, even though it's completely out of character for him. The local tattoo parlour denies all knowledge and only leaves him more confused with their comments on the nature of the design.

Days later, and after only one beer, another tattoo appears overnight. It seems to be a pictorial expression of the nightmares that plagued his sleep: desperate efforts to save drowning refugees. Perhaps those nightmares have something to do with his mental state, but the batteries that keep running down, the strange scratching noises below the floor and the urge to go out running in the mornings?

While Harry may be a small time journalist, one who never really fulfilled the promise he showed as a student, he still knows how to do research: through methods conventional, and some less so, he learns that he is not the only person experiencing this bizarre phenomenon. He soon finds himself involved in something bigger and more dangerous than he could ever have imagined.

Kemble manages to pack quite a lot into his tale: crooked property developers, drug-dealing motorcycle gangs, a Prime Ministerial candidate with a shady past, a sinking refugee boat, threats to heritage sites, the rape and massacre of innocent Afghans, an unexplained helicopter crash, a couple of ghosts and a bunch of suspicious deaths. That may sound ambitious, but Kemble brings it all together with consummate ease.

Kemble's protagonist is a totally believable, ordinary guy: genuine, loyal to his friends, no major vices, a bit clueless about women, not terribly ambitious, a bit self-deprecating but with integrity at his core. His support characters are likewise appealing, or, where necessary, credibly villainous. Kemble's intimate knowledge of Australian politics, journalism and the City of Brisbane are apparent in every paragraph.

Skin Deep has an original plot with a few twists and red herrings that keep the pages turning. The story moves along at a fast pace to a heart-stopping climax. This is a brilliant debut novel, and readers will be pleased to know that Harry Hendrick returns to the page in *Bad Blood*.

With thanks to Echo Publishing for this copy to read and review.

Paula Weston says

Absolute cracker of a read. The pace and characters are perfectly pitched, and the violence dark, gritty and believable. I particularly enjoyed the Brisbane settings, and, as a someone who was a suburban journo in Brisbane through the 90s, I can totally relate to much of Harry's day-to-day professional life. This is a brilliantly crafted and tightly-written thriller that I inhaled. Highly recommended adult thriller.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

'This will only end when justice has been done.'

Harry Hendrick is a journalist in Brisbane. His career hasn't quite followed the path he intended, damaged by a story he was following on corruption while he was still at university. Harry's a good bloke, popular with his mates and easy to get along with. But he's been unlucky in love, and has just broken up with his girlfriend and moved to a newly rented home. Not long after the move, Harry attends his mate Dave's buck night. He wakes up with a hangover, and a tattoo on his neck with no recollection of obtaining it. Could it be just the consequences of a bad night out?

But more tattoos appear, and with the dreams about war-torn Afghanistan, boat people, bikies, bar fights and murder, Harry starts looking for answers. Where did the tattoos come from, and what do they mean? And who is the mysterious woman who has become part of the dream? He finds Jess McGrath, who also has unwanted tattoos and nightmares. What are the nightmares telling them? Who are the people appearing in their nightmares?

At the same time as Harry's life is being taken over by tattoos and nightmares, there's a federal election looming. Andrew Cardinal, the opposition leader, is tipped to have a landside win. There's also a concerted local move to save an old water tower, which Harry investigates. The more Harry investigates, the more he becomes convinced that there are connections that need to be explored and he won't be frightened off.

The pace of this novel kept me reading, suspending disbelief, accepting events that my logical self would reject as impossible. No time for this logic, though, I had to find out what would happen next. Mr Kemble

has peopled his novel with some great characters and the city of Brisbane herself plays a starring role. The brutality of war, the power and corruption of politics seems sadly familiar.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Carol - Reading Writing and Riesling says

This book kept me reading till 4am this morning! What a page turner!

My View:

If you want a book that will keep you reading till 4am then this book is for you! This reader was exhausted but satisfied when the last page was turned.

Frenetically paced, tension packed, great characters with a narrative that manages to encompass so much – corruption, politics - internal and external, war, asylum, greed, relationships, work...I could go on...an all woven so deftly into this incredible tale of justice and retribution. I don't know how this author packed so much into one book without it becoming cumbersome or bogged down with issues. This narrative flowed, this narrative reached out and grabbed me by the throat and didn't let go until the last page was read!

This book has been touted as a genre mash up –and maybe that is what I found so refreshing and unique about this book. It is an action adventure, a paranormal crime thriller, a story of life and regrets and bikies and drugs and corrupt land developers and crime and politics and abuse, and...a little bit of everything else but all balanced and all with its own place in this narrative. If I was to describe this book I would probably settle on two words, crime thriller – the rest of the descriptors are just the stuff that makes this narrative interesting and compelling reading.

A great read. You won't be disappointed if you pick this book up – tired maybe but not disappointed. :) ?

Craig Sisterson says

Australian debutant Kemble blends dark mystery with a touch of the paranormal in this highly original and engaging read, which was shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Award.

Jaded journalist Harry Hendrick was once a rising star, but his career was derailed and is now circling the drain in Brisbane. He's meandering through life, a shell of his former self, and one morning he wakes from a hangover after a friend's stag do with a strange symbol tattooed on his neck. He writes it off as a stupid drunken choice, but then his mate Dave can't remember anything about them going for a tattoo. It seems to have appeared out of nowhere and is followed by more tattoos and violent visions that seem to be tied to the war in Afghanistan. Something isn't right. Then Dave meets Jess McGrath, a successful, married woman also suffering from mysterious tattoos and violent visions. As an election looms and the leading contender seems tied to their visions, Dave and Jess need to work out just what's going on.

This is a smoothly written book with a highly original premise that could have stumbled, but debutant Kemble handles it well and makes it believable within the world of his novel. There are plenty of fascinating contemporary issues woven throughout the tale, and a great sense of place along with interesting characters.

A novel that draws you in to begin with before building and building.

Mel Campbell says

This was a strangely compelling and original genre mash-up. I've never read anything quite like it and I found myself compulsively turning pages to unravel the mystery. It takes place in the kind of Joh-bruised Brisbane familiar to readers of Andrew McGahan – it reminded me strongly of *Last Drinks* in its vivid descriptions of oppressive heat and humidity, its jaded protagonist and the blariness of booze, and also in its suggestion that this weather and this corruption are somehow magically symbiotic. I'm not from Brisbane so I can't speak to its familiarity, but there's definitely a strong, distinctive sense of place.

But it doesn't have the kind of dry, world-weary proceduralism you'd expect from a political thriller. (By the way, there is an excellent joke here at the gentle expense of Brisbane airport-thriller author John Birmingham.) The paranoia and scares are broadly sketched, and there's an earnest, almost allegorical quality to the narrative.

I've read heaps of paranormal-themed works that are refined and literary in style, and/or directed at a female audience. But despite the hallucinatory mood in *Skin Deep*, there's something *blokey* about the gruff prose. It's striking when terse writing is turned to such a fanciful notion: that tattoos mysteriously *appear* on a protagonist who can then access nightmarish visions associated with each one. Or are they memories? And if so, whose?

Strongly recommended for those who like crime fiction and political thrillers, and also for those who are interested in a harder-edged kind of paranormal horror story.

Disclosure: I proofread this book for Echo Publishing.

Kyla Ward says

"But then after the war... ah, I dunno, war just teaches you the real meaning of fear."

Harry Hendricks is a journalist who has never been near a war. The closest he's come was when his expose of corruption in Brisbane city was sabotaged, leaving his career in tatters. But he's getting an education all the same and his own skin is the whiteboard. In this thoroughly contemporary ghost story, you can forget about haunted houses: as Harry soon realises, he's contending with a haunted body.

"Harry moaned. The top third of his back was covered in blood. In some places deep red, in others purple and black as it started to dry. There was a tattoo underneath, but he couldn't see it through the blood..."

...He wasn't doing this to himself. He knew that now. So someone or something was doing it to him."

Discovering the who and why is no straightforward task. Harry finds himself tracing a conspiracy from Afghanistan to Canberra, from motorcycle gangs to property developers, and the situation escalates quickly. Harry is no coward, but the tattoos and the alien memories they anchor expose him to a different kind of masculinity than his own, presenting a direct challenge to his already battered ego. In many ways, the real battle is for the journalist to trust in his own skills and cling to his own values in the face of ever-increasing

opposition.

Brisbane's body is haunted too. Heritage sites such as the old water tower tattoo the landscape with meanings opportunistic development can only wish to erase. Community groups and local newspapers mount their defence against big money and scurrilous tactics. This battle, familiar to the residents of any Australian city, plays out beside the other, and gives the novel its rich and particular texture. Gary Kemble, once of Brisbane and still a journalist, has constructed his fiction on a foundation of recent events. It's just that, in his universe, things didn't play out in quite the same way. I have it on good authority, for instance, that Mr Kemble is not a near-alcoholic whose girlfriend has just left him.

Full review at <http://tabula-rasa.info/AusHorror/Ski...>
