

A white-knuckle descent
into a street near you.

WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE
DO BAD THINGS?

WILD PLACE

CHRISTIAN WHITE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE NOWHERE CHILD*

Read the prologue of *Wild Place*

In the summer of 1989, a local teen goes missing from the idyllic Australian suburb of Camp Hill. As rumours of Satanic rituals swirl, schoolteacher Tom Witter becomes convinced he holds the key to the disappearance. When the police won't listen, he takes matters into his own hands with the help of the missing girl's father and a local neighbourhood watch group.

But as dark secrets are revealed and consequences to past actions are faced, Tom learns that the only way out of the darkness is to walk deeper into it. *Wild Place* peels back the layers of suburbia, exposing what's hidden underneath – guilt, desperation, violence – and attempts to answer the question: Why do good people do bad things?

From the international bestselling author Christian White, *Wild Place* is a white-knuckle descent into a street near you.

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PROLOGUE

‘The existence of Satan is a matter of belief, but the existence of Satanism is undeniable. Darkness lurks behind the lyrics of your child’s favourite song, on the shelves of your local video store, in the homes, schools and parks of every small town across the country. In tonight’s Special Look, we’ll be diving deep into the dangerous and troubling world of devil worship. It’s an epidemic and spreading fast. Nobody is safe. Especially not your —’

Nancy Reed changed the channel. It didn’t make much difference. She was looking at the TV, but not really watching it. Her mind was preoccupied. She was doing the two things guaranteed to bum a person out on a Friday night: drinking alone and reflecting on her life.

Somewhere along the way, something had gone wrong. She was forty-one, unemployed, and staring down the barrel of a divorce. But when she looked back, performing a kind of post-mortem on her life, there was no obvious cause of death. There was just a series of wrong turns, bad decisions, and unfortunate events. The cause of death, it seemed, was life.

It was coming up on 11pm. That’s late, for suburbia. Her daughter was at a movie and her husband – ex, she reminded herself – was in a budget room at the Camp Hill Motor Inn,

where he'd moved while they finalised the divorce. Nancy was alone, free to fall into a pit of despair and self-pity.

Speaking of despair, the Camp Hill Leader was on the coffee table in front of her, open to the employment section. Her yellow highlighter sat beside it. She hadn't even needed to take the cap off. The only things she seemed qualified for were night-filler, check-out-chick, or flipper of burgers. That was the problem with being a stay-at-home mum. None of those skills translated to the workplace. Tracie wasn't exactly the Antichrist, but she'd been a handful. Still was. Seventeen years of child-rearing should have qualified Nancy for an upper-management position in a psychiatric hospital, or a hostage negotiator, or a—

Creak.

The noise came from somewhere behind her. She spun around to look over the armchair. Most of the lights in the house were off – she'd be paying the electricity bills herself soon and wanted to get ahead of it. The TV cast wavering shadows across the walls. There was nobody there. At least nobody she could see.

Nancy clicked off the TV, stood in the dark and listened. There it was again: a soft, metallic *click*, a long, slow *creak*. It sounded like one of the windows being slid open from the outside. She crept through the kitchen and stood in the mouth of the hallway, then heard careful and deliberate footfalls in the darkness beyond.

Silence.

Before creeping down to the end of the house to investigate, she armed herself with the *Yellow Pages*. That's right, the *Yellow Pages*. She went right past the rack of hefty

frying pans and the block of Deba kitchen knives that were sharp enough to slice through a leather shoe and a tomato (in that order), and grabbed the damn phone book.

A gun would work better. There was one in the house, a rifle her ex-husband used to hunt rabbits when he visited his cousins – they lived up north, directly in the middle of arse-fuck and nowhere – but it was all the way at the other end of the house, on the top shelf of her wardrobe, in a locked case. The key was in the pocket of her ex-husband's jeans which were now, no doubt, slung over a chair in a room at the Motor Inn.

Nancy briefly considered calling him now, but decided she'd rather be dismembered and left in a shallow grave than give him the satisfaction. As much as she hated to admit it – and never would, out loud – Nancy missed having a man around for stuff like this. She was getting the hang of being a single mother, but sometimes wished it came with an add-on option. A male she could send blindly ahead of her, into danger.

She reached into the dark, flicked on the light, and was relieved not to find a psycho killer waiting there for her. She held the phone book aloft and moved steadily down the hallway. Halfway, she heard movement. A light blinked on somewhere. A pencil-thin slither of yellow fell out from beneath one of the doors. Tracie's door. Two more steps, then the sound of drawers being opened and rifled through. If they – whoever *they* were – had been ransacking any of the other rooms, Nancy might have crept quickly and quietly over to Donna Delaney's place next door to call triple zero.

But they were in her daughter's room. Common sense abandoned her and white-hot rage swept in. She raised the phone book high with her right hand. With her left, she took hold of the knob and swung the door open.

The intruder stood in the middle of the room, a small, compact woman with a striking sweep of bright blonde hair, bleached so recently that Nancy could smell the chemicals wafting off her.

'... Tracie?'

Nancy's daughter let out a court-room gasp, scrambled backwards so fast she knocked the clock radio off her side table, then sighed with relief. 'Jesus, Mum, you scared me.'

'I scared *you*? I thought you were a home intruder. What happened to your hair?'

When Tracie had left earlier that evening, she'd been a brunette. A pretty, effortlessly natural brunette. She'd come home looking like Blondie. She ran a hand through her hair. 'I felt like a change. Like a statement. Do you like it?'

'I do.' She didn't. 'You know, most kids sneak out of their bedroom window. Not the other way around.'

'I forgot my key and didn't want to wake you.' She changed into her pyjamas. 'How's the job hunt going?'

'It isn't.'

'Good,' Tracie said. 'You need to find a job; you need to find a man.'

'I'd rather blow my own brains out, but thanks anyway.'

'Come on, Mum. You're still pretty and funny and young. *Ish.*'

'Your dad's side of the bed is still warm.'

'But I won't be around forever,' Tracie said.

That stung in a way Nancy hadn't been expecting. It was true, of course. Tracie was at the pointy end of her final year in high school. After her exams, it would all be over. She was off to university next year, and then there would be work and boyfriends and weddings and children and Nancy would eventually die alone.

But that's not what bothered her. Correction: that's not what was bothering her right then. It was something in Tracie's tone. *I won't be around forever*. It was the kind of thing a parent said to a child, not the other way around. Since the separation, Tracie had aged. That was a strange thing to say about a seventeen-year-old, but it was true. Her eyes had darkened. Her expression had hardened. She felt the need to care and protect Nancy, rather than the other way around. That hurt. A lot.

'Your father and I will be fine,' she said. 'You don't have to worry about us.'

'I'm not worried about Dad. Not in that way, at least. He'll remarry the first bimbo he meets. He's a survivor.'

'If he's a survivor, what does that make me?' Nancy asked.

Tracie shook her head. 'I just hate to think of you living in this big house all by yourself.'

Nancy sighed, then sat down on the bed and helped Tracie under the covers. A whisper of warm air drifted in through the open window. Outside, Bright Street stood silent. An average street in an average suburb. A row of neat homes and cut lawns, streetlights battered with moths, Herm Backman's tow truck parked halfway over his neighbour's driveway.

‘So,’ Nancy said. ‘Talk to me about the hair.’

‘What about it?’

‘Usually when a woman does something this dramatic, it’s because she’s lost control of something major in her life and this is her way of taking back that control. Oh no, you did that because of the divorce, didn’t you?’

Tracie raised a smile. ‘This has nothing to do with you. But you might be onto something about the control thing.’ Her smile faded. Then she said the last thing you wanted to hear coming out of your kid’s mouth: ‘I need to tell you something.’

Nancy braced herself.

‘I think someone’s been following me.’

Nancy sat forward.

‘A few nights ago, someone called the house,’ Tracie explained. ‘When I picked up, whoever was on the other end of the line didn’t say anything, but I could hear them breathing. And since then I’ve had this weird feeling, you know, like I was being watched. The other day, at the roller rink. And then again tonight at the movies.’

Nancy waited. Then she asked, ‘Is that it?’

‘*Is that it?*’

‘Did you actually see anyone?’

Tracie glared at her.

‘I’m sorry, honey, but you do this.’

‘Do what?’

‘Last month you were convinced someone was outside your window, scratching on the glass, but the noise magically went away when I pruned the lemon tree. The month before that, you thought a poltergeist was moving

things around the house, until we discovered the window in the spare bedroom had been left open. You have a rich imagination, Trace. It's one of the things that makes you unique. But it also makes you ...' Nancy paused to choose her next word wisely. 'Reactive.'

'You sound like Cassie. She thinks I'm being paranoid. She says it's because I'm an only child and we need more attention.'

'I hate to say it—'

'Then don't.'

'—but Cassie might have a point.'

'I hate you.'

'I love you too.'

Tracie pulled the covers over her head.

Nancy tugged them back down. 'Darling, nobody's following you.'

Tracie looked at her with pleading, desperate eyes.

'You really think so?'

'I do,' Nancy said.

Tracie Reed went missing the next day.



Meet the author

Christian White is an Australian author and screenwriter whose projects include feature film *Relic*. *The Nowhere Child* was his first book and one of Australia's bestselling debut novels ever. An early draft of *The Nowhere Child* won the 2017 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript. *Clickbait*, a television series Christian co-created with Tony Ayres (*The Slap*), is currently in production for Netflix. Christian's keenly awaited second book, *The Wife and the Widow*, was published by Affirm Press in 2019 and became an instant bestseller. Christian lives in Balnarring, Victoria.

On writing *Wild Place*

It's been two years since the release of your second novel *The Wife and the Widow* (to critical acclaim, no less). What have you been up to in that time?

Thanks to Covid, I've spent a lot of time inside. I kept myself busy writing and producing Clickbait, the Netflix series I co-created with Tony Ayres, and co-writing (with Natalie Erika James) Apartment 7A, a feature film for Paramount. I also moved back to the Mornington Peninsula, which is where I grew up.

Your new novel *Wild Place* is set in 1989 in a fictional suburb in the area you grew up in. How did you go about creating Camp Hill?

Camp Hill is a combination of Mount Martha and Mornington, which is where I grew up. I like creating fictional towns set in real areas because it allows you to take liberties, while also feeling firmly planted in a particular place. In this case it was particularly fun, because in a sense, I'm writing about the world of my childhood.

Heavy Metal plays an important role in this book and we open to a quote from Motley Crue. Are these bands you'd listened to a lot before researching this book?

Listening to heavy metal of the 80s ended up being a big part of my research. I never really listened to that sort of music before writing *Wild Place* (I was always more of a The Smiths guy) but the deeper I delved into the era of Satanic Panic, the more relevant that music became. It's hard to imagine, but back in the 80s and 90s, concerned parents were terrified of this stuff!

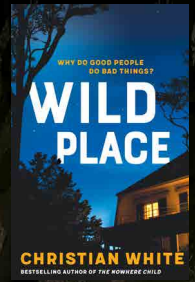
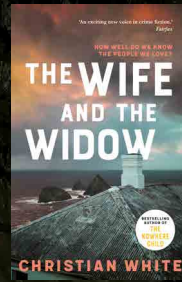
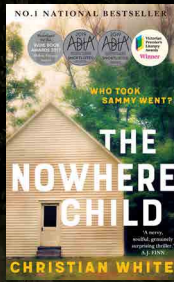
On writing *Wild Place*

When did you first become interested in the Satanic Panic?

Satanic Panic was a wave of mass hysteria and moral panic that took place in the 80s and 90s. I've been interested in it for a long time, probably since learning about The West Memphis Three, a group of teenagers who were wrongly convicted of murder in the early 90s, largely based on the way they dressed and the kind of music they liked. But I didn't know I wanted to write about it until the pandemic hit. Early during the first lockdown, I was amazed at how quickly conspiracy theories emerged, and how many people seemed eager to believe them. Then there was Q'Anon! It became clear that the more scared/angry/outraged people are, the lower their standards of evidence become. That felt like a really fun thing to write about, which is why I came back to Satanic Panic.

The protagonist, Tom Witter, is the kind of character you walk passed every day in your street and never think twice about but there's a dark undertone to his every day normality. How did you craft this character?

My last book, *The Wife and The Widow*, was about women. In lots of ways, *Wild Place* is about men. So I started with a dorky, forgettable, suburban dad, then just kept peeling back the layers.



What they said...

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