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[Wilson, Rohan](#)

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Tasmanian convict saga gets skilful update from Rachel Leary.

The Australian, August(12), 12 August 2017.

[Book/Film/Article Review]

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<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/tasmanian-convict-saga-gets-skilful-update-from-rachel-leary/news-story/9f6511ec2e9781650396ec55e7c4565f>

Tasmanian convict saga gets skilful update from Rachel Leary

There's a long tradition in Tasmanian literature of the gothic convict saga. In fact, Tasmanians do the convict novel better than anyone. We have a wealth of mythology, trope and imagery on which to draw and an outsized sense of our own past, a past that's visible in the architecture wherever you go on the island.

Our best known book, Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, provided the template and writers have iterated on it down the generations. Think particularly of Richard Butler, Bryce Courtenay, Christopher Koch and Richard Flanagan. Now Rachel Leary has provided us with a contemporary, skilful update on the dustier of these traditions in her new novel *Bridget Crack*.

We first meet Bridget working the potato fields for her assigned master. She's a young woman, transported to Van Diemen's Land for passing counterfeit coins, and her new life in the colony is a mean one. Her master, Pigot, is needlessly cruel to his assignees, and when another convict falls ill Pigot leaves him to die alone in a hut and then buries him in a shallow grave. Bridget realises her predicament. She knows if she stays, she'll be next. She steals some food and tobacco and makes her bolt for freedom.

This is where the book starts to surprise us. Bridget is not a passive, suffering prisoner as many of the fictional convicts of the past have been. She is casting her own dice. In fact, you'd need to go back to Robert Close's portrayal of Eliza Callaghan in 1957 to find another character that resembles Bridget, a woman who refuses to bend to a patriarchal system of justice. But whereas Eliza Callaghan relied on the power of her femininity to pull herself out of a scrape, Bridget gets by on her wits and bravery alone.

It's refreshing to see some old tropes turned on their head and the book manages to keep defamiliarising these narrative moments right to the end. After escaping from Pigot's farm, Bridget finds herself in the company of a group of bushrangers led by the formidable Matt Sheedy. These are not good men. Immediately, Bridget is drawn into their hard-living, hard-drinking methods. They rob and kill settlers up and down the Midlands and, when the police presence becomes too threatening, they retreat into the scrub to hide among the network of convict shepherds and absconders along the frontier. There are latent feelings between Bridget and Matt that suggest we may be on board for some romantic plot developments, but Leary is not a romanticist. Her mode of operation is to play with our expectations and hint at possibilities before pulling the rug out from under us. Again, this speaks to the book's bigger ambition to renovate the convict saga rather than repeat it.

As you'd expect from this kind of literature, the historical setting is gritty and dark and accurately drawn. Leary uses the right amount of detail to build Van Diemen's Land in all its brutality. The never-ending wet weather; the weighty feel of a shotgun; the squabbling sound of feeding devils. We're given just enough to let our minds wander, but not so much that we are overburdened with detail. Pleasingly, this detail is often pressed into the service of raising tension. Leary loves keeping us on edge, guessing, waiting for something horrible to happen, which it invariably does. This is one of the book's biggest pleasures.

Also to this end, we're introduced to the character of Captain Marshall. His scenes alternate with Bridget's and give us another perspective on the colony. Marshall is a soldier seeking his fortune in the colony. He brings his wife Eleanor and her sister Jane to Van Diemen's

Land, hoping to escape their matrimonial problems, but those problems are only amplified by the presence of their assigned convict, Bridget Crack. In flashbacks, we learn how Marshall found himself drawn to her. When the Sheedy gang begins raising heck, Marshall is sent into action against them. The presence of Bridget among these killers causes him a good deal of conflict. Will he be forced to hurt her? Can she be saved? Again, Leary raises expectations here, only to take a very different tack. This book has more on its mind than easy answers.

What becomes clear after reading *Bridget Crack* is there is a good deal of life left in the convict saga. Leary has set about dragging the genre into the 21st century with this smart, unsettling update. That there's a sense of menace on every page is only an added pleasure. This is the kind of book that keeps you reading past midnight, holding on for dear life. An incredible debut by a brilliant new talent.

Rohan Wilson is a Tasmanian writer. He is the author of the novels The Roving Party and To Name Those Lost.

Bridget Crack

By Rachel Leary

Allen & Unwin, 320pp, \$29.99