

## **Australian panic as 'Unknown Terrorist' sparks a pub ejection**

**By Kathy Marks in Sydney**

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Reading a book in a pub might seem an inoffensive activity but when drinkers saw the title of a book being read by Michael Chalk, they complained to bouncers and he was ejected.

Mr Chalk was reading *The Unknown Terrorist*, the latest novel by the Australian author, Richard Flanagan. The book has received critical acclaim, but patrons in Shenanigans, an Irish pub in the Queensland city of Cairns, clearly had not heard of it.

Mr Chalk, a teacher who was in town for an education conference, had not even ordered a drink when a security officer asked him to leave. "He said several customers had complained about the literature I was reading and I'd have to move on," Mr Chalk told the Cairns Post.

Mr Chalk said he believed his appearance – he is olive skinned, with dark hair – played a part in the incident.

*The Unknown Terrorist* is about a Sydney pole dancer who finds herself Australia's most wanted terrorist after spending a night with a man called Tariq. The novel is a critique of post-11 September paranoia, whipped up by politicians, the media and security services.

In Cairns, the title of the novel was enough to make Mr Chalk the object of suspicion. He said: "It was my last night in Cairns so, after dinner, I walked into Shenanigans and decided to have a bit of a dance. I put the book face up on a ledge near the dance floor. Shortly after, a security guard came over to me and said "move to the front, please'.

"I hadn't even bought a drink yet, so I asked why, and he said he'd explain outside." Once on the pavement, the bouncer told the 40-year-old from Melbourne that other patrons had expressed unease about his choice of reading material. "I was absolutely flabbergasted," he said.

"I found it quite distressing. I was wondering whether I'm in a place where everyone is in the grip of fear, where they see danger everywhere, or the sort of place where a vigilante group might hunt me down for reading a book."

Flanagan, whose previous novels include *Gould's Book of Fish* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, said in an interview last night: "If it wasn't so disturbing, it would be deeply comical. The criticism that was made of my book when it came out was that it was implausible. But I

guess it goes to show that it wasn't implausible enough to match the bizarre reality of contemporary Australia."

Mr Flanagan said recent cases such as that of Mohammed Haneef, the Indian-born doctor wrongly detained in Australia as a suspected terrorist, reinforced his message. Charges against Dr Haneef, who is now back in India, were withdrawn for lack of evidence.

Earlier this week, prosecutors were forced to drop charges against Izahar Ul-Haque, a Pakistan-born medical student accused of training with a terrorist organisation. A Sydney judge voiced scathing criticism of security officers, saying they had kidnapped and unlawfully detained Mr Ul-Haque.

Flanagan said: "Far from being far-fetched, my novel correctly predicted the future of Australia."