



# Boy swallows Brisbane

As the TV adaptation of Trent Dalton's bestseller is released, visit the places at the heart of the novel

DENISE CULLEN

**A**nyone who has read *Boy Swallows Universe* would instantly recognise the murals at Brisbane's Hotel Indigo. They are the first seven words of Trent Dalton's blockbuster novel, "Your end is a dead blue wren", brought to life. Here is one wren, hovering above the lift doors; there is the other, positioned 16 storeys high on the hotel's exterior. And like the magic-realist vein of the book itself, there are painted "portals" joining the pair.

Hotel Indigo's aesthetic is rooted in storytelling, and it unpacks other local influences in a four-page art guide. But my companion and I are here to explore the settings for the best-selling book, stage show and just released Netflix series. Conceived by *The Weekend Australian Magazine* writer Dalton, *Boy Swallows Universe* is the story of Eli Bell, who grows up surrounded by criminals, including one of Queensland's most infamous prison escapees, convicted killer Arthur "Slim" Halliday.

Inspired by the author's own upbringing, the action unfolds at some of Brisbane's landmarks, as well as its lesser-known backstreets.

We leave our luggage in our 12th-floor suite and walk around the block to heritage-listed Brisbane City Hall. Opened in 1930, the grand old dame underwent a \$215m restoration a decade

ago. It's in this building, amid the sandstone columns, marble staircases, soaring ceilings and glittering chandeliers, that *Boy Swallows Universe* reaches its shocking but satisfying denouement. A lift takes us to the Museum of Brisbane's third floor, where tours of the 92m-high clock tower depart every 15 minutes. We enter one of the city's oldest working cage lifts for the ride to the observation deck with wraparound views.

Dragging the metal door closed, our guide confesses that while she has not read the book, people ask questions about it "all the time".

Here, thanks to Slim's nefarious connections, Eli gains admission to a secret stairwell, and learns other details about the building's layout that will later prove crucial to the plot. Today's visitors can't poke around as Eli did, but our guide pauses the lift on the way back down. Through the metal grille, we peer at the old grandfather clock that keeps time for the tower's four faces.

After morning tea at Brisbane's oldest cafe, the Shingle Inn, located just downstairs, we walk to Roma Street Station for the 40-minute train journey west to Dalton's childhood home of Darra. Eli describes the suburb as "a paradise, a bowl of Vietnamese noodle soup filled with prawns, domes of plastic crabmeat, pig ears and pig knuckles and pig belly". Darra is flush with fabulous, no-frills Vietnamese restaurants, including Que Huong, an eatery that inspired a pivotal scene. A replica of Que

Huong's second-floor balcony was a set in the stage show, while some scenes in the Netflix series were shot in the restaurant itself. Que Huong has round dining tables, vinyl tablecloths, sheer curtains and tanks of fish and mud crabs that, Eli says, "always seem so resigned to the fact they'll form tonight's signature dish". Channelling the fictional restaurateur's extravagance, we order spring rolls, salt and pepper whitebait, sugarcane prawns, and egg fried rice.

With full bellies, it's just as well we're booked on an afternoon walking tour. We'd hoped to wander through Boggo Road Gaol, a towering presence in *Boy Swallows Universe* – and not just because the real-life Slim made two successful escapes from it. However, the long-running tours of the notorious prison are suspended due to construction works nearby, says Crime Tours Australia founder Jack Sim.

Instead, we're booked on the Moonlight State Fortitude Valley Crime Tour, named after the 1987 ABC investigative story by Chris Masters that exposed police corruption. The tour shines a light on the dark corners of Brisbane in the 1980s, when Dalton was growing up. "No escaping the light and no escaping the shade," Slim would say.

During a two-hour stroll through the still-colourful inner-city suburb, we visit cold case crime scenes and sites where illegal casinos and brothels flourished. Laughter ripples through



## IN THE KNOW

Hotel Indigo Brisbane City Centre is on Turbot St in the CBD; rooms from \$239 a night, suites from \$499, twin-share. The Sebel Brisbane Margate Beach has king deluxe rooms from \$239 a night, junior suite from \$349.

[ihg.com/hotelindigo](https://ihg.com/hotelindigo)

[thesebelbrisbanemargatebeach.com.au](https://thesebelbrisbanemargatebeach.com.au)

Free 15-minute Clock Tower Tours run daily from 10.15am to 4.45pm.

[museumofbrisbane.com.au](https://museumofbrisbane.com.au)

The Shingle Inn is open from Tuesday to Sunday.

[shingleinncityhall.com](https://shingleinncityhall.com)

Que Huong restaurant operates every day except Wednesday.

[facebook.com/quehuongrestaurant68](https://facebook.com/quehuongrestaurant68)

Historic Australia and Crime Tours Australia conducts cemetery, ghost and crime tours in Brisbane, Ipswich, and Charters Towers.

[crimetoursaustralia.com.au](https://crimetoursaustralia.com.au)

Stanley at 5 Boundary St opens daily for lunch and dinner, with yum cha only for Sunday lunch

[stanleyrestaurant.com.au](https://stanleyrestaurant.com.au)

Fun Time Hire in Redcliffe rents electric scooters and bikes from \$35 per hour.

[funtimehire23.wixsite.com/fun-time-hire](https://funtimehire23.wixsite.com/fun-time-hire)

Scarborough Harbour Brewing Co operates Wednesday to Sunday.

[scarboroughharbourbc.com.au](https://scarboroughharbourbc.com.au)



From far left, Brisbane City Hall clock tower; Hotel Indigo artwork; Stanley restaurant; The Sebel; Hornibrook Bridge

the group when our guide produces an old “menu” belonging to bathhouse Les Bubbles, which now simply serves steak, fries and salad (though the 15-person spa is still in place in the downstairs bar).

Sim knows Dalton personally, and says he’s always been stunned to hear people describe Brisbane as a “sleepy country town”. “The underbelly of Brisbane was something I grew up knowing about,” he explains. “When I started this (tour) business, I wanted to raise awareness of the dark side of the Sunshine State ... and unbeknown to me, a young man (Dalton) was also living some of this.” Boy Swallows Universe is an unknown blend of truth and fiction; it’s hard to tell what’s real. But Sim reflects that the fantastical tale has proved such a ripper because it resonates with emotional truth.

Much like Brisbane, which started life as an especially brutal penal colony but now has one of the World’s 50 Best Hotels (The Calile) and Australia’s best restaurant, as rated by Gourmet Traveller (Agnes), Dalton’s fortunes have shifted dramatically in recent years. The city’s transformation has never been more apparent than as we approach Howard Smith Wharves, which stood derelict for decades, before being relaunched in 2018 as a dining and entertainment precinct.

We slide into a corner booth at Stanley, reputedly Dalton’s favourite restaurant. This two-level, fine-dining establishment features Cantonese classics, from sweet and succulent honey-glazed free-range char siu pork to the delicious signature steamed dim sum platter. There’s a captivating cocktail list, too. I sip a Pak Tai’s Garden, noting how the dark, moody interior of the restaurant contrasts with the glittering lights of the Story Bridge outside.

Next morning, we hit the road for the 40-minute journey to Brisbane’s northside. In the novel, Eli goes to live with his father in Bracken Ridge, but we push on a little further to the seaside suburb of Redcliffe, home of Moreton Bay bugs and Sunday markets that stretch for miles. In an interview with the Moreton Daily, Dalton described spending a lot of time here and credits its carefree lifestyle with sparking his creativity. We wander through Bee Gees Way, a 70m street tribute to the famous Gibb brothers, who played their first gig at the Redcliffe speedway.

While Eli’s preferred mode of transport is a “rickety Malvern Star”, we hire electric bikes to get about. Breathing in the briny air, we ride along the seafront promenade from Redcliffe to sparkling Scarborough Harbour, with its cluster of trawler-to-table restaurants. We pull up seats at the Scarborough Harbour Brewing Co, quenching our thirst with beers brewed on site and our hunger with a bowl of cod fritters.

After lunch, The Sebel Brisbane Margate Beach beckons. Of

## We visit cold case crime scenes and sites where ... brothels flourished



the property’s 56 rooms, we’ve snagged the only junior suite, with lounge and dining space, a well-equipped kitchenette, private balcony and panoramic views of the ocean through Norfolk and hoop pines. Dominating one wall is a black and white photograph from the 1930s that depicts the street corner where the hotel now stands. Redcliffe has always been a low-key holiday destination for Brisbane and surrounds, says general manager Kathryn Dearing. “Lots of people come to stay at The Sebel because they came here as kids on holidays with family and loved the area,” she says.

The next morning, driving back to Brisbane, we follow the coastal road until we reach the bridge linking the city and Moreton Bay. Hunkered alongside it are remnants of the old Hornibrook Bridge, where anglers can still be found casting a line. In the book, Eli meets up with Slim here and tries to reel in a “monster” flathead. The traffic slows. I spot the silhouettes of a tall, thin man and a teenage boy, fishing side by side. One blink, and then they’re gone.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Tourism and Events Queensland.

