An art to dealing with the devil

By PUBL BROWN

IN the world of indigenous art is the dealer really the devil? With a sense of mischief author Adrian Newstead suggests as much in his comprehensive book on the subject, The Dealer is The Devil: An Insider’s History of the Aboriginal Art Trade. It’s a provocative title designed to get our attention and it does, although Newstead confesses that it wasn’t his idea. “My wife suggested The Dealer is The Devil,” he says. “It fits perfectly into the Zeitgeist of the period.”

Much has been written about Aboriginal art but Newstead’s book is unique because of the breadth of his knowledge and first-hand experience. This book is a history, a memoir, a thorough examination of the trade. It is the story of his life on the road and a chronicle of some extraordinary friendships with the people who matter most in this book, the artists.

Newstead is a lucky man who has been at the coalface of one of the great art flowerings of the late 20th and early 21st century. If you think that’s a purely parochial assessment, think again. This is a global art movement of great importance.

Tapping into the collective unconscious and creativity of the oldest culture on the planet has given us a variety of art and artists that has no comparison. There have been many negative stories along the way, some of them about carmepbagging dealers and the vagaries of the art market. Newstead knows about all this from the inside, being an art dealer himself, founder of Cooee Aboriginal Art Gallery in Sydney, Australia’s oldest continuously operating Aboriginal art gallery. It opened in 1981.

So are whitefellas such as Newstead art mercenaries cashing in on poor artists? There have been ruthless art dealers along the way but, for the most part, whitefellas have been people of goodwill, excited and enthusiastic about indigenous art with a desire to share the good news.

The story of indigenous art wouldn’t be complete without looking at the business because it is that business that has helped it go global. It’s a fascinating story, Newstead has been part of it and, in the end, the devil is in the detail.

THRICLER
THE COUNTERFEIT AGENT
Alex Berenson
Putnam, $28

GLOBAL politics is complicated enough but if you are a big-time counterfeiter, it’s even more complicated.

The story of counterfeiter John Wells, making his eighth appearance in this novel, wraps up undercover to stop a CIA station chief from being assassinated in Iraq. Wells is up against a secret international agency that is trying to deceive the US government into bombing Iran.

Berenson rattles up the action to the highest degree while keeping his characters balanced and intriguing.

VERDICT: GRIPPING PLOT
Oline H. Coghill

FICTION
THE POETS’ WIVES
David Park
Bloomsbury, $28

“BEHIND every great man stands a woman” is the idea behind this collection of three novellas by Irish author David Park. The three stories look at a famous poet at the end of his life through the eyes of their partners. The twist, not giving anything away, is that only two of the lives are real.

Catherine Blake, wife of 19th century poet and illustrator William Blake, now recognized as a true visionary, muses on her love of a man widely regarded as mad.

Hedeha, the wife of 20th century Russian poet Osip Mandelstam and committed his poems to memory when Stalin exiled him to Siberia.

Lydia returns to the cottage on the Irish coast to follow the last wishes of her second-string poet husband. Despite being a promising set-up, it is neither as enlightening nor as entertaining as it could have been. Maybe we should just use this as a springboard to read more poetry.

VERDICT: CURIOUSLY UNPOETIC
Ian Barry

BIOGRAPHY
NORMAN MAILER: A DOUBLE LIFE
J. Michael Lennon
Simon & Schuster, $45

A BIG personality deserves a big book and this biography of American writer Norman Mailer is a 947-page doorstep. More than Hemingway, Mailer personified the writer as action man. By age 25 he had both a war and a best-selling novel, The Naked and the Dead, under his belt. He was an intellectual, pupilist, writer, journalist, family man and philanderer. He was vain and combative, enjoyed his drinks and drugs, and fell out with most famous writers of his generation. Not only did his champion murderers, he was arrested for stabbing his second wife. And he ran for mayor of New York. In between, he wrote 12 novels and much memorable journalism.

Lennon knew Mailer for 35 years and has made the most of the access he had to Mailer’s wives, children and papers. The result is an exhaustive and nuanced portrait of a man who refused to be ignored.

VERDICT: EXHAUSTIVE AND NUANCED
Jenny Tabakoff

INDEPENDENTS
1 Empress Dowager Cixi Tidjani
2 My Brilliant Friend Elena Ferrante
3 Letter to George Clooney Doreen Reid
4 Alfonso Felix Calvino
5 Isle Traveller Dan Kuran

AUDIOPUBS
1 The Fault in Our Stars John Green
2 The Guffalo Julia Donaldson
3 Animal: The Giant Within Anthony Robbins
4 The Book Thief Markus Zusak
5 The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People Stephen R. Covey

E-BOOKS
1 Divergent Veronica Roth
2 How to Win Friends and Influence People Dale Carnegie
3 When Charlie Came Home Erica Farber
4 Allegiant Veronica Roth
5 12 Years a Slave Solomon Northrup

BESTSELLERS
1 I Quit Sugar For Life Sarah Wilson
2 Be Careful What You Wish For Jeffrey Archer
3 The Book Thief (film tie-in) Markus Zusak
4 The Fault in Our Stars John Green
5 Concealed in Death J.D. Robb

LIBRARIES
1 Be Careful What You Wish For Jeffrey Archer
2 The Book Thief Markus Zusak
3 Eyrie Tim Winton
4 Concealed in Death J.D. Robb
5 The Narrow Road to the Deep North Richard Flanagan

THE DEALER IS THE DEVIL
Adrian Newstead
Brand & Schlesinger, $50