

Images of Surveyors

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Address:

I had to drop my intention to speak on surveying in relation to music and radio through lack of material. However, I can connect many popular songs to surveying jobs and people I worked with on those jobs. (See “1979.”)

The only legitimate connection I could make concerns a new rock group called “SR71.” In Canberra we have a series of survey marks prefixed by “SR” – standing for steel rod – and SR71 happens to be at the intersection of Drake Brockman Drive and Spoffoth Street in Holt, a couple of blocks from my home. (Alas the rock group SR71 is named after an aeroplane).

So I am forced to return to a favourite topic of mine: fictional surveyors. Although I have already published two articles on this topic, I am still finding new material to study.

From the ancients to the moderns I find references to surveyors in works of fiction. These references provide authentic feedback on what writers think of surveying and surveyors. Sadly, this feedback is rarely flattering.

A notable exception is the Australian writer Murray Bail whose latest novel “Eucalyptus” won the Miles Franklin award in 1999. This novel, and earlier novels by Bail, tend to show surveying in a light that is acceptable to surveyors. In correspondence I’ve had with Mr Bail he claims to have retained a vision of a surveyor as a noble figure, behind a theodolite, on the edge of the Australian interior.

Regrettably in all my collection of surveying quotes from works of fiction, there are very few concerning the relationship between surveyors and chainmen. Until a few years ago this was a very important aspect of surveying.

Chainmen, coming from a far wider range of backgrounds than surveyors, provided knowledge and training to surveyors. Knowledge of the world and training in life skills – particularly in keeping surveyors’ egos at acceptable levels and providing opportunities for surveyors to learn how to overcome embarrassment.

The absence of this influence on many of today’s younger surveyors is painfully obvious.

One novel that does explore the surveyor/chainman relationship – if somewhat allegorically – is *The Castle* by Franz Kafka. The surveyor in this story, while tormented by “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, is continually subversively threatened by his two chainman.

The tragedy of the surveyor in *The Castle* is that he is eventually stripped of all identity and by the end of the novel is wandering aimlessly – in both mind and body – in a world he does not understand.

I will be mindful of this story when I come to vote on the future of ISA later in the year. I will not be voting for any scenario that threatens my identity as a surveyor.