

# SURPRISES IN STORE

A self-storage facility on the outskirts of Brisbane is the unlikely setting for Brisbane writer David Cohen's new novel

## PHIL BROWN

Have you ever passed one of those stark self-storage facilities on the edge of town and wondered what goes on there? Besides storage, that is. Brisbane writer David Cohen has, and found it the unlikely inspiration for his latest novel.

*Disappearing off the Face of the Earth* is a darkly humorous and surprisingly riveting tale from the urban fringe of his adopted city. It was when he and his wife, academic Simone Brott, moved to Brisbane seven years ago that inspiration struck. "I used a self-storage facility when we moved here and immediately thought there was potentially a very interesting story behind such a place," Cohen explains. "They're often on the edge of cities and are places that are overlooked. But a lot of things could be going on behind the facade."

The utter banality of such facilities was attractive to Cohen, who confesses he has a warped sense of humour. What is surprising is that he is not a watcher of the reality television program *Storage Wars*. In that show, the contents of abandoned storage units are auctioned off. Some are full of junk, others laden with treasure. But if you know the show (I admit to Cohen that I'm a *Storage Wars* tragic), you will also have wondered whatever happened to the people whose units are being auctioned off. Did they die tragically? Move overseas? Are they in jail? In *Storage Wars*, we never find out. That mystery is at the heart of Cohen's story too because at his fictional Hideaway Self Storage, located just off Brisbane's M1,

manager Ken Guy and his assistant Bruce have to contend with abandoned units. They refer to the folks who abandon them as having "disappeared off the face of the Earth" because, well, it seems like they have. Have they met with some sort of foul play? Stay with the story because you will find out, eventually.

Cohen says it took him a few years to land a publisher and the story went through several drafts before Melbourne outfit Transit Lounge picked it up. The two main characters remind one, at times, of Harry and Lloyd, the protagonists in the 1994 Farrelly brothers film *Dumb and Dumber*, and Cohen isn't unhappy about the comparison. His main character, Ken, is not Cohen, he points out, but he does share the author's passion for progressive rock and bands such as Yes. It's a nice personal touch.

In the book, the storage facility is falling apart. "That's a metaphor because the characters are also deteriorating," Cohen says. "The self-storage facility is another metaphor, a storehouse of people's memories. And the disappearances suggest the idea of losing a sense of identity and belief."

To incorporate elements that range from *Dumb and Dumber* to an atmosphere reminiscent of French philosopher, playwright and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre

reflects Cohen's own tendency to "move between the highbrow and lowbrow".

Cohen, 49, is a creative writing tutor at University of Queensland and also works as a student adviser at Queensland University of Technology, where his wife Simone lectures in architecture. Cohen grew up in Perth and has also lived in Melbourne but chose Brisbane as his setting because it's now home, although in a sense his novel could be set in any large Australian urban centre. The book is described as "a surprisingly funny study of physical and mental deterioration" and it is, metaphorically and actually, as Hideaway Self Storage looks set to be eclipsed by Pharaoh's Tomb Self Storage, a big new franchise being built nearby.

Cohen says he chose the self-storage milieu because "a lot of people are working in these kinds of jobs" and those people are not often the subject of fiction. "It's not the sort of subject matter that would normally get a publisher's pulse racing," Cohen admits. But Barry Scott of Transit Lounge Publishing got it.

Cohen's first novel, *Fear of Tennis*, was named by poet Les Murray as one of his favourite books of 2007. Cohen has mainly written short fiction since then and his 2016 short-story collection *The Hunter* was shortlisted for the inaugural Dorothy Hewett Award for an unpublished manuscript. And it's still unpublished. But Cohen's self-storage story is finally in print and he's happy about that. *Disappearing off the Face of the Earth* by David Cohen (Transit Lounge, \$29.95)



**The self-storage facility is a metaphor, a storehouse of people's memories**