

A blend of whisky and violence

Doug Johnstone once designed deadly missile systems but left it all behind to write dark novels. He tells Colin Waters how men behaving badly is a theme that recurs in his new book set on Islay

Freedom an' whisky gang thegither," wrote Robert Burns. The history of whisky and Scottish literature is long, as long as the relationship between whisky and Scottish writers is deep. Another connection: both books and firewater are important exports, economically and culturally, more so now heavy industry is a folk legend and our banking sector has committed hara-kiri. *Smokeheads*, Doug Johnstone's third novel (which uses the Burns quote above as an epigraph)

is a thriller ostensibly. Just beneath the level of the plot – four thirtysomething friends on a whisky-tasting trip to Islay get mixed up with homicidal bootleggers ending in murder, a desperate chase, and an exploding distillery – something else is going on. Johnstone finds in the whisky industry and the antics of its aficionados a reflection of the state of the nation.

"I had my eureka moment," Johnstone says of the genesis of *Smokeheads*, "watching the film *Sideways*. I saw those wine snobs and I thought it would make for a good story to do something similar with whisky connoisseurs." Johnstone

was a member of Scottish Malt Whisky Society for a year. "Knowing a bit about the subject I thought it ripe for a piss-take. The more I researched the book, the more it seemed to me an interesting way of looking at Scotland."

Johnstone's protagonist Adam has organised the trip to Islay to persuade Roddy, a flash banker with disposable income to burn, to invest in a distillery he wants to set up on the island. The other distilleries on Islay are mostly owned by foreign multinationals, with the money they make never staying long enough within Scotland to benefit the country. Our culture, but their cash.

Islay itself appears to have benefited little; as the friends discover, there's barely a sop to anything that might be called a tourist trade on the island.

Readers of Johnstone's first two novels – *Tombstoning* (2006) and *The Ossians* (2008) – will recognise in *Smokeheads* the emergence of a recurring theme: the consequences of men behaving badly. "They're all middle-class men of a certain age, thinning hair, spreading waistline," Johnstone remembers, talking about whisky-tasting events. He detected a strain of childishness. "It reminded me of boys growing up, that urge to collect things. You get a number