BOUNCING
ON THE KNIFE EDGE

THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES
OF AN AUSTRALIAN MISFIT

FRED D. JAMES
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The Life and Adventures of an Australian Misfit

By Fred D. James
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Don’t Give Up
Fred D. James was born into a reasonably wealthy Australian family but in his words ‘was soon segregated from the wealth’. His life then took a series of astounding turns as he graduated from a normal childhood to a precarious association with biker gangs, street thugs, drug cartels, Chinese triads, guns, narcotics and God.

Blending into normal society under the shroud of being a professional chef, his real life was hidden in the many ‘societies within society’ that few of us know about or even believe exist – shadowy worlds where life is cheap and survival happens at the frightening edge of normality.

Fred’s life story is an amazing ride through criminal excess, unbelievable-but-true adventures, stubborn resilience and eventual redemption, encompassing over half a century of near-fatal car accidents, failed marriages, alcohol abuse, hair-raising brushes with criminals, thugs and cops, inventive money-making ideas and more life-threatening medical emergencies than he can count.

‘Ridden hard and put away wet’, this tattooed ex-crim, ex-thug, ex-lost soul somehow managed to come out the other side relatively intact. His experiences and scars are real, the pain is still healing and his dangerous life illustrates that even the most tarnished soul can crawl away from the darkest of tunnels to find hope and, with time, become a better human being.

Fred D. James has earned his colours, paid his dues, wrestled with pain, walked the fine line between life and death and emerged 56 years later as an improved person, understanding that although you can learn from your past, it need not define or overwhelm your future. His riveting, uncensored (and at times humorous) true-life account is a compelling mixture of unforgiving criminality, miraculous escapes, trusted friends, heartless enemies, love, loss, healing, the discarding of hatred and resentment... and the eventual acceptance of his own fragile mortality.

Today, Fred uses his incredible journey to inspire others who may have taken their own wrong turns in life - and are looking for a way to positively change their own futures, no matter how desperate or hopeless they may seem. He works with disengaged youth to show them that if someone with his past can emerge from the deepest shadows and become whole again, anyone can.
Introduction

The scariest thing about this book is that everything in it is true.

I grew up as a fairly normal kid in a loving home in Croydon - a semi-rural suburb of Melbourne, Australia. Fast forward a bit, and that’s when things started to get a bit more interesting:

- I have been associated with two of the largest outlaw biker gangs in the world
- I have worked for the Lebanese cartel
- I have worked for the Italian Mafia
- I have catered for the Asian triads
- I have been stabbed three times, shot at four times and threatened with guns over a dozen times
- I have seen shit so shocking that I cannot even put it in this book, because you would never believe it happened
- I have been involved with several types of serious crime, at all levels
- I am living proof of the existence of other societies that live inside what you would call ‘normal society’
- I have sold weapons and contraband to many people, some of whom still hold high-standing positions in society today – both in Australia and overseas
- I have done things to survive that you could not possibly imagine
- I have cheated death more times than a man deserves to, but I’m still here

I know how fortunate I am. Not all the people who live the kind of ‘outsider lifestyle’ that this book describes are in a position to tell their stories, as I am. Many of my old friends are dead. Others disappeared into the prison system, never to be heard from again. A few suicided, or killed themselves more slowly through substance abuse. A few of the luckier ones, like me, made it through – thanks to sheer luck, skilled surgeons and medical teams, the love and support of family and friends and some well-honed survival skills.

Having survived this life, I want to share it, so those who are ‘doing it tough’ can take some positives from all the negatives I experienced. It’s a tale with a bucketful of regrets, some proud moments, a half-century’s worth of physical and emotional scars, a little humour, good mates, loathsome enemies and more adventures and strange turns than I could have ever anticipated, growing up as a skinny, fun-loving kid in Melbourne’s outer suburbs.

I’ve turned my life around. It’s taken a hell of a long time but I’ve finally got my life as close to normal as a guy like me is ever going to get. Over the years, I’ve taken a lot from society – so now I think it’s time to give something back.

I want to work with charities and help people in whatever way I can. I want to be a living example to those who dwell on the fringes of society (and those other great pretenders who live right in the heart of it) and convince them that no matter how
dismal or desperate the future appears, no matter how many times you’ve fucked up, broken the law, done wrong or hurt people in some way (including yourself), whatever terrifying health issues you face, it only takes a tiny fragment of hope to start making the sort of life-altering changes that can bring you back from the brink.

In these pages you’ll find a ton of hairy adventures, shocking behaviour and teeth-jarring twists (spoiler alert – just about all the surprises are nasty ones), but here’s the thing – I have had to leave a lot of stuff out. You may think ‘the names have been changed to protect the innocent’ but that’s not it, really. Sure, there’s a sprinkling of reasonably innocent people in this book, but also a huge array of guilty-as-hell fuckers who ran (and may still run) in violent criminal circles, and wouldn’t take kindly to having their real names or illicit activities made public in a tell-all memoir.

Aside from issues of personal safety, there’s also the danger of getting sued. The modern world loves a good lawsuit. I was a big, tough, intimidating guy for many years but nothing frightens me more than a smooth-talking lawyer who loves litigation (yeah, they all do) and smells blood in the water.

So... if a particular account in this book seems deliberately vague, or someone is referred to only by an initial, or I’ve left out or changed specific names, places, dates or other details, there’s a very good reason: I want to protect myself, my friends, my family and those out there who are ‘still in the life’ from harm, embarrassment, society’s disapproval, jail or a bullet to the head. Some may currently be in the process of sorting out their own lives for the better (I hope so), and deserve every chance to do that without me stuffing it up for them by spilling their ugly beans.

I haven’t magically turned into a wonderful man just because I’ve put my less-than-stellar past behind me. I’m still a work in progress health-wise, emotionally and in a heap of other ways. Regular society and I still have a pretty uneasy relationship – we’re a bit like two wolves warily staring each other down, circling from a safe distance and afraid to get too close. But I think we’re starting to get along a bit better now. And let’s face it – modern society has just as many problems as I ever did.

I don’t know if the experiences recounted in this book were some kind of test for me. And if so, I have no idea if I passed or failed. I just know I survived. At the moment, that feels like more than enough.

Vultures sitting on the sidelines, awaiting the inevitable

Watching carefully and counting the breaths until there are no more

Waiting to pounce and dissect the corpses whilst still warm

Tearing the flesh away before it even has a chance to rot

Even before the soul has a chance to leave the shell

Living for now on what morsels are left over from the beasts’ meal

But never losing sight of the day... when the beast becomes the food
Chapter 1  Just a Kid from Croydon

Life was so pure and simple when we were kids. I was the youngest and the only boy, so I was made to feel pretty special. All the James kids enjoyed that special childhood innocence that’s completely oblivious to negative outside influences. We felt loved, fulfilled and completely protected – as every child should.

We didn’t yearn for anything more than what other children had and I suppose we felt rather spoilt, because we never really went without. We had friends, space to play and all the freedom that came with being a child in the 1960s. This was long before the Internet age and even television was pretty new. We sure didn’t spend hours in front of it like children in later generations.

Life was good, with regular family meals and special nights with visitors. On Fridays, fish and chips become our weekly ritual, with Mum getting a bottle of ‘Log Buggy Spumante’ - a home brand wine from the local pub - as a treat.

Most of my memories as a young bloke are of wonderful Christmas days and contented times, but it didn’t take long before I started causing a ruckus. I guess you could say the trouble first started when my family was enjoying a sunny day at Bonbeach, a Melbourne seaside suburb. I was two years old. After an incident in the water where it looked like I’d drowned, I was declared clinically dead by ambulance officers. I’d turned blue and had no detectable pulse. Mum was having none of that, however, and refused to believe I was gone for good. Jumping into the back of the ambulance (much to the shock of the ambos), she uncovered my seemingly lifeless body and frantically resumed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until I regained consciousness.

If you watch a lot of medical or cop shows on TV, you’ll come away with the impression that bringing people back from the brink of death with CPR is successful about 75% of the time it’s performed. Out in the real world, I think the success rate is closer to 10-15% so I was one lucky little guy, for sure.

You know how people often ask ‘Do you remember where you were on the day John F. Kennedy was shot?’ Well, at least I can tell you exactly where I was on the day before – I was lying in the back of an ambulance on a Victorian beach, being brought back from the dead by my stubborn Mum. I guess ‘not taking people’s word for shit’ must run in the family. The whole incident even scored a full front-page spread in the newspaper. I reckon if it had happened one day later it would have barely rated a mention, since by then the world had a lot of other things on its mind.

Was this first near-death experience some kind of an omen, a brief sampling of what was to come for Fred D. James? Yeah, I reckon maybe it was.
On a typical day, my two oldest sisters and I would go to school, then come home and play outside. We pretended to be panthers, pirates or comic-book heroes while being watched over by our Mum as we all waited for Dad to come home from work.

Dad was an amazing man, someone I’ve always looked up to and had a load of respect and admiration for. He’d been a chef, instrument maker and engineer by trade. At that time, he was working hard for an industrial pneumatic conglomerate. The company gave him little reward or recognition for his brilliant mind, which was making them rich thanks to his clever inventions and ideas. Dad would break up the monotony of his work by jumping from one field to another every couple of years.

Dad had rented 23 acres with our house in Croydon North, Victoria, where we kept horses, cows, sheep, dogs and a small orchard out the front. Croydon is a bit north-west of the Dandenong Ranges. These days it’s a little more built up but back then it felt like being way out in the country, even though it was technically a Melbourne suburb. There was plenty of space for a young lad to roam around in – I loved it.

Our days were kept full with watering, feeding and looking after the animals. Then we’d come inside, wash up and sit around the table for a loving family meal. Exhausted in a healthy sort of way, we’d later crawl into bed (with our teddies, of course) and drift off into a deep sleep, cosy and contented. If it sounds idyllic, that’s because it truly was.

On weekends, we’d either find some way to entertain ourselves or spend Saturday and Sunday at the pony club (yeah, I already said we were a bit spoilt). Mum was the local pony club Secretary so we were expected to attend, compete and (hopefully) win the competitions, but we really didn’t care either way.

Back on the farm, we found all kinds of ways to keep occupied. I remember one particular game the three of us kids used to play. It involved taking turns climbing inside a topless 44-gallon drum that the others would then roll around the paddocks. Whenever it was Amie’s turn (the middle sister) to be inside, it never failed that the other two of us would eventually get around to rolling her straight into the creek, drum and all.

We thought it was hilarious, watching her try to get out of the drum while it was filling with water. Being kids, we were oblivious to the possible dangers and didn’t care. Amie was a bit bigger than her sister Janet and I and we treated her like she was a bit dim. We meant no harm by it at the time but looking back, I guess it was a bit cruel.

I’d had a few hearing problems as a child which were ignored most of the time, but when I was 11 or so, I went to an ear specialist who found I had a cancerous abscess in my right ear canal. As a result, I had a fairly involved surgery (with little hooks and eyelets) in an effort to rebuild my inner ear. This was in the days before they had the bionic ears and micro-electronics that’s around today.