

## **Viewpoint – Winter 2000**

### **MAX -Alex Radovanovic**

*What was it about suicide? Everybody wanted to know, to get in on the act. They all wanted to know why. Why did he kill himself? Why? If we knew the answer would it make sense? ... The details were clear, the whys and wherefores not so clear. Not so clear? If the truth was told, murky would be a good word. And no matter what you did, when your friend killed himself, the meaning of it all just fell through your hands like mist between your fingers. Why'd he do it?*

These are the tumultuous thoughts and painful questions of Max Fairchild as he grieves for his best mate, Lou Petrocelli. In his latest novel, MAX, Michael Hyde tackles the growing problem of teen suicide. This is a contemporary book that doesn't shy away from this heartbreakingly brutal subject. For this reviewer, Hyde's book has brought back many tough reminders of an adolescence in which a friend also chose to end his life, and the gruelling aftermath of his actions. Make no mistake, the authenticity of Hyde's work resonates in every passage and turn of the page.

The horrible truth is that there are no definitive answers and Max struggles with this ambiguity. Both boys are presented as loners seeking emotional connections and a sense of continuity in their lives. The bond of mateship forged between them is expressed in their works of graffiti – symbols of resistance against authority and an emblematic representation of young males seeking permanent identities in a superficial world:

*Max moved back to his work, touching up the top edge of his dead friend's name. The purple letters folded into a mass of colours. The streetlight cast moving shadows that gave the piece a life of its own. Purple pulsed in the night like a beating heart as Max stood back to look at the letters of Lou's name ... As he sprayed, the colours surrounding Lou's name seemed to move in and out of the wall. Purple oozed towards him, looping like a wave ready to ride... Max sprayed. He was possessed, floating and swirling in front of the wall. In the barrel of the wave he swept the can over and into Lou's name. In the depth of that bleak night Max saw Lou's eyed staring out at him, a melancholy gaze that asked for nothing but to be complete.*

The fundamental sense of ambiguity and lack of completeness tortures Max. To counteract these oppositional forces he needs to feel life in all its raw abundance and this is where Hyde excels as a writer. One of the most remarkable qualities of Hyde's novel is the variety of lyrical flourishes which seamlessly blend within this intense and evocative narrative. This is amply illustrated in Max's kayaking expeditions. They might seem tranquil, but they rapidly turn into violent escapades that challenge his masculinity and threaten his life:

*Max felt the deceptive calm before the storm...Bending his body to the task, he felt a band of pain around his chest. Max wanted to be rid of the pain. He was sick of the words that came from nowhere, he was tired of the whirlpool of confusion and anger that beset him. He was fed up with his world going up and down like a yoyo... even if he had second thoughts about what he was doing, there was no turning back now. The kayak was champing at the bit, its nose snorting at the chance. And its rider wanted nothing else.*

Most of the characterisations in this book resonate with clarity and depth. Max's girlfriend Mai is very effectively depicted, as is the hermit, Nikolai Ivanovich. Indeed, his brother, Woody adds to the rich texture of the family dynamic. However, Hyde momentarily falters in his uneven and one-dimensional portrayal of Detective Gillespie who seems needlessly cruel and bullish. It seems odd that this character vividly inhabits earlier parts of this book and makes a significant impact on Max, only to disappear without a trace.

Despite this minor criticism, Hyde's novel is lucid, affecting and frequently poetic in its depiction of adolescent male hysteria. MAX is a confronting novel that delicately maps the myriad, yet tenuous personal connections which can redeem or condemn young men in our society.