

# **Max**

by Michael Hyde

A review

John Williams

*Max* is the story of a teenage boy who must deal with grief following his best friend's suicide. *Max* deals with the youth related issues youth depression and suicide in the context of a family under social stress, set in a working class society where race and bullying are important factors. This novel shows the problems working class twenty first youth are exposed to and their efforts to resolve them as the plot is slowly but methodically played out. Its author Michael Hyde gives his youthful protagonist the artist eye of a graffiti enthusiast who finds meaning and solace in his illegal art in spite of the police bullying and violence his graffiti earns.

I liked the way Hyde paces his story slow enough to allow reflection and still maintain authenticity, using Max's nine year old brother, Woody as his external conscious and regulator in an attempt to keep his sometimes confused brother in the light of reality without declaring himself outright his judge and guide. Woody, in acting as Max's pseudo mentor, shows remarkable depth and partly succeeds in countering his older brother's negativity that borders on fatalism. He does his best to comfort Max by rationalising life and death. 'Lou may be a spirit in the next-door world – starting all over again' (Hyde, M 2000 p. 43) These words are typical of his insights. It is Woody who seems to understand his brother the most, partly because of the innocence of childhood, partly because he is too young to be blinded by worldly prejudice, and through his empathy, has the gift of understanding and clear sight.

Hyde demonstrates a natural propensity to emphasise with his market, well aware as never before suicide is part of the teenage experience. Step by step the author follows the grieving process of a young boy who is confused and shocked by his friend's death, and expresses his feeling of betrayal by what he wrote at the graffiti railway wall "You should have talked to me; I'm suppose to be your friend" (Hyde, M 2000, p. 21). This plaintiff appeal to his deceased friend's spirit defines the book and who Max really is: a boy searching for love and acceptance,

something for him that is ever allusive. Everything in adolescence is exaggerated and Lou's death has challenged Max's existence and certainties. Michael Short of the *Age* reports even though there has been a decline in suicide rates, this has not been reflected in mental orders. It is the main reason while suicide is the main cause in death in the 15-24 age group (2011). It's Lou's shadow that is a force which guides Max from beginning to end of this novel. His grief is part of coming of age, his transition from youth to man. Alison Caldwell of ABC Melbourne, reports a seventeen-year-old Victorian teenager Allem Halkic committed suicide because of cyber bullying over several months (2011). Not every teenage boy has Max's strength, some as the previous article shows don't make it.

*Max* fits neatly into the Australian canon of literature, comparing with well with *Max* compares favorably with John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began*. *Max* is not a book for the faint hearted, Hyde makes no apologies for stark realism in both language and theme, this book is about a boy who front the first page to the near end is flirting with death that hovers carefully just out of sight but never out of mind, death in the form of his deceased friend's Lou's spirit. *Max*, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, arrives too late at the scene to prevent the death of a love one, *Hamlet* can never deal with death, *Max* finds himself drawn to it but in the end death cannot claim him because the spark of life is too strong. The love of his deceased friend that encouraged his flirting with death is balanced and finally overpowered by the love of his family and girl friend. *Max* draws the reader into the protagonist's soul and each chapter we feel his pain and confusion.

*Max* compares favorably with John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began*. Where Marsden's book puts eight teenagers in a war setting, Hyde's work places Max as a lone ranger, his is a lonely, harder war where he has to draw upon his strengths to win or fall. In *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, the eight characters though powerful in themselves are also quite believable because of their ordinariness, any teenage reader could easily relate to them. Marsden sets his protagonists in an extraordinary situation, Hyde's hero is quite the opposite, Max is everyman, his life is quite ordinary for a working class boy from Melbourne's western suburbs. Many adolescents on both sides of the class line could relate to that.

Hyde effectively uses third person narrative in *Max*, he uses first person narrative in another of his novels *Tyger Tyger* equally successfully. *Tyger Tyger* has some similarity to *Max* where the hero Johnny, has to work his way through life's trauma. *Hey Joe* is to some degree autobiographical, dealing with anti war protesters, its hero Jimi, deals with the ghost of his father Joe in the sixties in the shadow of the Vietnam War. All three books to some degree deal with loss in context of a boy's life.

Hyde demonstrates the deepness Max relates to his street art and how both artist and art become one and the same through Max's dialogue 'Max felt himself float, felt the swell beneath him, gathering him in the power of its curl' (Hyde, M 2000, p.21). Max regards his law breaking with unvarnished disdain as he believes his art is a legitimate expression of his feelings and a vehicle to reach others of like mind.

Max is the quintessential adolescent living on the dark streets, enjoying the independence and thrills and resenting the long arm of the law his graffiti escapades earns him. *Max* should find a place in most teenage boy's reading list because it is their story, the adolescent male searching for self in an often confusing, contradictory world. 'Max breathes in and feels Lou all around him' (Hyde, M 2000, p. 174). Most adolescent boys, either younger or older, can relate to Max's last comments in the book in their effort to deal with pain that comes with close friendships.