

Australian Book Review

Stephen Matthews

There's hardly cause for surprise when topical themes crop up simultaneously in a pair or more of new books, but when the link is nihilistic teenage central characters with a penchant for painting graffiti in Melbourne, the coincidence is an extraordinary one...

Thankfully, Michael Hyde knows far better how to engage his readers and, in *MAX*, the third person narrative allows him to give a much more persuasive picture of his eponymous central character. When we meet him, Max is struggling to understand the suicide of Lou, his best friend and fellow graffiti artist. It's become hard for him to take an interest in anything or anyone around him, until his classmate, Mai, gently befriends him. Even the glimmerings of first love, however are not quite enough to divert him from his increasingly nihilistic behaviour. He's estranged from his stressed father (his mother left some years previously) and he doesn't quite understand his younger brother 'because there was something about Woody's mind that reminded him of a minefield'. It doesn't help when his passion for graffiti leads him into a brush with the law. But it's his other favourite activity, kayaking, which tempts him into the increasingly dangerous challenges which result in the crisis that finally enables him to come to terms with his friend's death.

Hyde's novel is a passionate and fast-moving story, told in tight, fresh, flying prose ... Furthermore, *MAX* has a lot to say about, and hopefully to, modern adolescent males. As far as teenage suicide goes, it's more thought-provoking than many of the other recent novels on the subject, and Hyde uses the graffiti-painting background to far greater effect ... in the end the book isn't as emotionally effective as it promises to be early on – it seems to run out of steam about two thirds the way through – but Hyde is definitely a writer worth watching.