

Tyger Tyger Review: Warwick Hadfield. Island Magazine. 2002

Marketing hyperbole has reached ear-splitting levels in the cash or crash world of modern publishing, particularly in the youth, ahem, demographic. You don't have to have read a Harry Potter book to know more about him and his creator than her tax accountant does. The information is circling you every nanosecond in the media so easily manipulated by the publicists. Don't dare ask if it's any good, just look at the bottom line.

A long way from this vulgarity is Vulgar Press's *Tyger Tyger* by Michael Hyde. There are no television commercials, chances to win great prizes under the caps of soft drinks or breathless media conferences about the search for a star to play the central character. Though the back cover does indulge in a bit of what my grandmother called 'having tickets on yourself'.

Richard Osborne, who played an awful lot of football, including a game where he was knocked senseless, and who is a close friend of the authors, says: 'Tyger Tyger has captured the heart and soul of our great game. It's truly engrossing ... a wonderful read.'

The story of Johnny Carbone is a good read. It did engross if only because of the need to find out if the ending would be the suspected happy one. I asked my 18-year-old son to read it. He put aside his PlayStation to devour it in an afternoon - a compliment if ever there was one - but smiled wryly at the flawless ending. Perhaps, courtesy of all those American sitcoms where the world is turned upside down for 25 minutes and then put back together in the last five, happy endings have lost some gloss. In a youth-oriented book maybe a little hope that things can work out in the end is no bad thing especially when for so many young hearts and minds, the future can seem so utterly hopeless. Thus *Tyger Tyger* becomes a sort of Tom Brown's school days transplanted from the homogenous playing fields of England's public schools to the cosmopolitan world of Australian football in the suburbs of Melbourne and to the wildernesses of Tasmania. The writing is not always even. It took a visit to Geeveston and bits further south and west in January to confirm the accuracy and cleverness of the descriptions of the Tasmanian wilds. Every shadow is a mystery, every raindrop a magic prism.

However, Johnny's voice can sound much older and wiser than his 17 years could possibly allow. In my day-job I work with eight blokes the same age as Johnny, all of whom have achieved his dream of making it into the AFL. I can't imagine any of them, even the boys educated at some of Australia's finest private schools, managing: 'Ever felt the weight of the world on your shoulders – rock hard and heavy as death?' But we quickly get to the farting stories, that Esperanto of footy in which a man's ability to pass wind can make him as legendary as any ability to kick a bag of wind and Ossie Osborne's claims have a ring of the real about them.

Johnny Carbone is a young gun footballer, following in the sprig marks of his late father and doing so by playing with the men of the Ballantyne Tygers instead of boys. The coldly omniscient talent scouts have spotted him, but for dark mysterious reasons, he can't always play at his best. Sometimes he does what only Gary Ablett at his peak would attempt. At other times he plays like a 17-year-old kid up against men. This is variously resented, tolerated or forgotten about altogether when someone lets rip a monster fart.

There's a love interest, a couple actually as Mum succumbs to the talent scout and Johnny falls for the girl up the road.* The best parts of the book are set in Tasmania. Where Johnny goes to get over a hammy and also manages to unravel the mysteries of his recurring dream featuring a ... and to better come to terms with his father's death. Spending a night in the Tasmanian bush is not generally recommended for the treatment of hamstrings. However, a couple of years ago, Geelong Football Club did send Ronnie Burns home to the Northern Territory so his family could rub some local remedies on his leg and he came back and kicked five goals in his first game! Johnny gets back from Tasmania to do something similar.

Tyger Tyger is a likable work. Michael Hyde has toiled diligently to tell an Australian story in a compelling and insightful way, no bad thing in a world where baseball caps on back to front, pissed without the off and all sorts of other Americanisms are thrust at us daily as if they were our heritage.

There is a movie in this story. As well as his depictions of Tasmania, there are other tantalising scenes in the book, not the least the drenching storm along the Melbourne foreshore. I would like to be in the front row of the media conference when the lead

role is announced, cheering for Australia over the globalists, or at least win a great prize after discovering a Tyger under the top of my bottle of Hartz mineral water. Not Vulgar at all.

(*Catherine, Johnny's love interest, is also the trainer of the football club – Ed)

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