

Footy Dreaming

THE TRUTH THAT MAKES THE STORY

In an article written by John Morrison, *How true is that story?* he says, ‘...if the writer had not had a certain experience he would not have written the story. It’s what he does with truth that makes the story.’ Morrison is an almost unknown Australian writer but is one of the best short story writers this country has produced. He was my first writing mentor when I tried my hand at writing stories in the mid-1970s . He urged me to keep my eyes, ears and heart open to the possibility of story.

I’d been asked by a publisher to write a novel about Aussie Rules footy. As a sports fan, lecturer in Sports Writing, and (mainly) a YA author, I had written several YA and Children’s books on the many levels of sport (*Tyger Tyger; Surfing Goliath; Change the Game* series). However I had never dealt with the racism I had heard and seen watching footy games, both country, suburban and AFL. On a number of occasions, not being able to shut my mouth I have come near to being beaten to a pulp. So that was my first instinct. Sport. Young people. Black and White. Racism. But I needed what Morrison had written about – the experience.

Where better to find it than at the Indigenous Rumbalara Football/Netball Club in Shepparton, in northern Victoria. It was dusk on a chilly Thursday night and I was sitting with the President of the club, Paul Briggs. Most of the older senior players had finished training. I had been watching a group of 14-15 year old Indigenous boys playing kick to kick in the goal square. They weren’t concentrating on their goal kicking but more their high marking, reminding me of the roots of Marngrook where the main action was kicking and high marking. And what a joy it was, to see these young men leaping, many feet off the ground, going for the mark, plucking the ball out of the crisp night air. We watched for some time, then Paul turned to me and said, ‘See those two there, about 15 years old. They’re here every training session and Saturdays whether they’re playing or not. Watch

the taller boy there. He keeps his family together. Comes down here for a break. Good player. Lovely pair of hands as you can see. Anyway, maybe there's your story.'

That was what stuck with me over the many days and nights I drove up and down the Goulburn Valley Highway. Couldn't get that picture of that kid or his life from my brain. Every time I veered towards some other path, that lithe young Koori kid leapt in the air and said, 'Hey, keep on track will ya?'

As an experience it wasn't much to go on but I've discovered that my stories emerge, sometimes in surprising spikes, other times as a result of hard thinking. Yes, 'hard thinking'. It would be pleasant if all my narratives came through my dreams and intuition (and some do) but sometimes you know you have a nugget hidden in the dirt that demands some hard labour. So I kept travelling up the highway, watching game after game, organised interviews with a young Collingwood player who'd originally played for Rumbalara, drove to suburban, regional and interstate schools delivering writing workshops and all the time, remembering what Morrison told me to do – 'keep your eyes, ears and heart open'.

Sport is important to many Australians. And it's especially important in country towns. Driving to a school in the Latrobe Valley I found the town I could use. I wanted a town small enough where many of the inhabitants knew each other (but not really), and one that could provide a hot house atmosphere for the conflicts that would arise. A town where sport, but in particular, Aussie Rules was an obsession. I named the town, Marshall, after another almost forgotten Australian writer, Allan Marshall, author of *I Can Jump Puddles*. From then on I thought it might be a good idea to use the surnames of other Australian authors (past and present), throughout *Footy Dreaming*.

A few months later on a boiling hot day, I spoke to a Year 10 class at Shepparton High School. The students were a wonderful multicultural mix, including some Aboriginal kids. The range of personalities were there also – bold, academically switched on, tough, shy, flirtatious, curious, arrogant. Being a secondary school teacher in the Western Suburbs

of Melbourne for 25 years and a lecturer at Victoria University for 15 years makes these observations easy. It also provided excellent raw material for characters I needed. I already had a 15 year old Koori boy who became Noah. There was a smart young Koori girl in that sweltering classroom – I knew there'd be a small romantic interest so Millie, as I called her, was it. And of course I had the school the two boys would attend, Marshall Secondary College.

Some weeks later I again watched the Rumbalara footy team and realised that even though it was mainly a team made up of Koori men, there were a number of white guys as well. What caught my eye was a couple of ex AFL players running around, including Rupert Betheras, an ex-Magpie player and white, who thought it was a good idea to play for the team that all Shepparton knew was basically the blackfella's team. I made him younger and called him Ben.

And then it came. A blackfella and a whitefella together. Playing together. Maybe really knowing nothing about each other. Perhaps both working off stereotypes. Young enough, like those kids on that first night with dreams, big dreams of playing at the highest level, making it to the hallowed turf of the MCG.

Now the heart of my story was these two young men coping with not only their obsessive dream but with the pressures of the town on the 'two most likely' and overlaid is the sometimes open and covert racism in the town and on the footy ground. Then along came the racism aimed at Australian of the Year and Sydney Swans player, Adam Goodes and I knew my novel had legs.

A final but important word. Indigenous people in this country often feel used, especially by whitefellas like me using their culture, life stories, sadness and joy for our own ends. Consequently when it came to some sensitive parts of my story, like Noah, the young Koori travelling with his family to a funeral in Heywood, in western Victoria, I knew I had to be entirely respectful. So I gave it to Karen Jackson, an indigenous colleague of mine at VU to read that section to see if I wasn't being too clumsy. Nor did I want to be too

precious either. Karen got back to me to tell me it was all OK. But what she wanted to really tell me was that she had read my draft on her way to a funeral – in Heywood.

Let me return to that experience on a cold night in July at Rumbalara. That thirty minutes led me on a search for the story I knew was there. I went looking for the truth that Morrison had written about, and found it in *Footy Dreaming*. A month after the launch I took a present of thirty books back to the club. The place was crowded and as the main game got underway I searched for that 15 year old with springs in his heels. I couldn't recognise him but my story demanded that he be there. Certainly his spirit was.

Michael Hyde.