This is the author's radio script of this article.


‘Raw, powerful and intensely masculine,’ says the media release for Stephen Scourfield’s first novel Other Country. Intensely masculine is right on the money: if there’s a male equivalent of chicklit – blokelit? – this is it.

Ace and Wild Billy Parkes are brothers, whose father manages cattle stations up in Australia’s northwest. In their remote outback situation, incredibly, he gets away with beating their mother to death, and then he gets to work on the boys. He never bothers naming his sons, so they have to christen themselves. Wild Bill Hickok provides the bookish younger boy with his name and role model, while the older calls himself The Ace ‘perhaps mostly out of wishing’.

The boys finally walk out on their hateful old man in their late teens, and find an opportune fairy godfather, John Lacy, who gives them work on his properties and eventually helps them buy their own place. But they can’t escape their violent past, as foreshadowed early in the novel when Billy ‘feels he can see things coming: a smashing together of history and inevitability.’

For all the drama of its plot, Other Country often reads more like an inventory than a novel. Scourfield is a journalist by profession, and he is intent on getting the facts across. He produces lists of bush tucker, ancient geology, eccentric (though largely indistinguishable) ‘characters’, tools, timber, Aboriginal beliefs, environmental issues, homespun bush philosophy. A loving paragraph is devoted to Ace’s favourite knife, and vehicles and guns are referred to affectionately by their model numbers, meaningless to the uninitiated. On the other hand, he often seems to hit on the wrong word: ‘Portals of stained glass were cut to his puritanical designs’ – I
thought puritans disapproved of stained glass. ‘The ringers’ swags become home; clandestine away from the firelight’: ‘clandestine’ doesn’t exactly mean ‘private’ which seems to be what is intended here. And ‘a scatter of forgotten pantyhose’ is an inapt simile for shed snakeskins as seen by a man who has hardly met a woman, let alone shared a house with one.

The women in this novel are strange creatures mostly distinguished by their bustlines. At one point three women are mentioned within six pages, each described in terms of the tightness of their tops and what they reveal. Billy exchanges some stilted intellectual conversation with an attractive greenie but gets nowhere. The Ace fares little better with his tattoo-parlour pickup. I suppose that’s to be expected in a culture where a woman can be murdered and no-one takes any notice. Even the benevolent Lacy has no luck with the ladies: ‘I’ve always believed you need a woman who makes love like a willy-willy; a woman who can cook a different meal every day out of the same supplies; a woman who looks to you for wisdom and laughs at your jokes [etc.]... Trick is never to let them meet.’

*Other Country* is ambitious, but it tries too hard. It’s over-written, preachy, and its gruff manliness spills over into sentimentality far too often.