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Title:
Matinee by Michael Stevens

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Matinee

By Michael Stevens

Allen's Unwin

R.R.P.
~~P.P.P.~~ \$12.95

ISBN (unreadable)

Don Dunstan

When he turned the corner and saw the Macaulay house, Ulysses began to skip, kicking up a heel. He tripped and fell because of this merriment, but got to his feet and went on.

His mother was in the yard, throwing feed to the chickens. She watched the boy trip and fall and get up and skip again. He came ^{quickly and quietly} and stood beside her, then went to her nest to look for eggs. He found one.

He looked at it a moment, picked it up, brought it to his mother and very carefully handed it to her, by which he meant what no man can guess and no child can remember to tell.

William Saroyan, in 'The Human Comedy'

carefully illustrated the difficulty facing adult writers trying to express the thoughts and impulses of a child. ~~While~~ As one gets older, it often seems that childhoods memories are the most vivid, and that those of intervening years often fade, or disappear entirely. But the childhood ones are selected, modified by hindsight and experience.

Michael Stevens has written a novel seeking to recount the whisking thoughts, dreams, impressions, excitements, distractions, obsessions, and impulses of an adolescent. It is a task often undertaken by others with only partial success. Michael Stevens has succeeded more than most have.

'Matinee' is ~~about~~ narrated by Tim Kemp, a twelve-year-old living with his parents and brother in Rose Bay, New South Wales.

He is ~~weedy~~ weedy, ~~is~~ short-sighted and with a 'lazy' eye which he is chivvied

keep covered by a patch. His closest friend is a part-Polish Jewish boy who tends to dominate him, and is obsessive about butterfly collecting and dreams of Warsaw. Sam is also contemptuous of Tim's continued love of and identification with the hero of comic-book and cinema-serial, 'Black Arrow' - an identification symbolised by his secretly carrying a 'Black Arrow Agent' identity card and a water pistol, in case he is urgently contacted for action from 'Black Arrow' headquarters.

The action takes place during the ^{long} Christmas holiday between the end of primary school and the start at high school. Sam and Tim plan holiday activity, but apart from building a raft, accomplished through Sam's determination and organising ability, these largely come to naught. Tim is ~~over-~~ ^{over-} taken by growing dissension between his parents and his

mother's confiding its causes to him, his friendship for a middle-aged ^{and alcoholic} woman neighbour who lends him books and encourages his adventures fantasies about cowboys, his boyish crush on Sam's obsessive elder sister, whose boy-friend the two friends discover and expose in a heinous offence, and a final and disastrous breakdown by his mother.

Michael Stevens has drawn the boys with understanding and sympathy, ~~and to~~ chronicles Tim's and his brother's differing reactions to the domestic crisis situation. He pictures Tim's moving from his fantasy world, to his times with Sam in which he can ignore the ~~the~~ situation at home, to those times when, faced with the inadequacy of parental behaviour his reaction is 'I wish they wouldn't.'

As a vignette of the life of a suburban adolescent, it works well, and is a good read.

I find a nagging doubt, however, about the picture drawn of Tim's mother. According to the story she has built a large employment agency with several branches, including interstate ^{ones}. But as we see her she is not a woman who has the necessary authority for such an accomplishment, nor the income. If the house were provided for solely by the income from Tim's father, (the ineffectual editor of a suburban newspaper,) its furnishing and the standard of living depicted would be believable. But with a two-income family where the mother's income is stated to be much more than the father's, the furnishings of the house and kitchen seem incongruous, and Tim's mother is a pathetic figure.

Otherwise the story telling is effective and at times compelling. The novel deserves the Vogel award it has won.

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His mother was in the yard, throwing feed to the chickens. She watched the boy trip and fall and get up and skip again. He came quickly and quietly and stood beside her, then went to her nest to look for eggs. He found one. He looked at it a moment, picked it up, brought it to his mother and very carefully handed it to her, by which he meant what no man can guess and no child can remember to tell.'

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Michael Stevens has written a novel seeking to recount the whirling thoughts, dreams impressions, excitements, distractions, obsessions and impulses of an adolescent. It is a task often undertaken by others with only partial success. Michael Stevens has succeeded more than most have.

'Matinee' is narrated by Jim Kemp, a twelve-year-old living with his parents and brother in Rose Bay, New South Wales. He is weedy, short-sighted and with a 'lazy' eye for which he is chivvied to keep covered by a patch. His closest friend is a part-Polish Jewish boy who tends to dominate him, and is obsessive about butterfly collecting and dreams of Warsaw. Sam is also contemptuous of Jim's continued love of and identification with the hero of comic-book and cinema-serial, 'Black Arrow' - an identification symbolised by his secretly carrying a 'Black Arrow Agent' identity card and a water pistol, in case he is urgently contacted for action from 'Black Arrow' headquarters.

The action takes place during the long Christmas holiday between the end of primary school and the start at high school. Sam and Jim plan holiday activity, but apart from building a raft, accomplished through Sam's determination and organising ability, these largely come to nought. Jim is overtaken by growing dissension between his parents and his mother's confiding its causes to him, his friendship for a middle aged and alcoholic woman neighbour who lends him books and encourages his adventure fantasies about cowboys, his boyish crush on Sam's obsessive elder sister, whose boy-friend the two friends discover and expose in a heinous offence, and final and disastrous breakdown by his mother.

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