

Peter Rose. *Rose Boys*. Allen and Unwin, 2001.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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There are books which are difficult to review because they are so good that anything one says about them seems redundant. A review of bad or middling work is easy to write, but when there's nothing much to criticise, there's little room for wit, and the critic is left casting about for the language which will do the book any justice at all. *Rose Boys* is such a book.

Peter Rose, poet, publisher, and the editor of *Australian Book Review*, has written a family biography about his older brother Robert whose career as one of Australia's foremost sportsmen was brutally cut short in 1974, at the age of 22, when a car accident left him a quadriplegic. Robert had been equally comfortable playing cricket and football and was therefore at the very centre of the mainstream Australian sporting world. Their father had been a brilliant footballer himself, with several sporting brothers, and was a famous coach at Collingwood and Footscray. It speaks volumes about the nobility of the family that Peter, obviously cast in a different mould from his male relatives, never felt alienated.

Robert survived his accident by 25 years, and this book charts the lives of the four remarkable people in his nuclear family until Robert's death in 1999. *Rose Boys* is a love story, absorbing and eloquent. Peter is candid about his admiration for his parents and their unsparing efforts to give Robert the best possible life, and deeply impressed by Robert's own bravery and perceptiveness. He quotes from a newspaper article Robert wrote not long after

the accident: ‘Suddenly you find you are responsible in a way to the people caring for you and you have to look after their morale almost as much as they care for you. Your family is caring for you so much that they become pretty vulnerable themselves, while you are learning to cope better each day.’ Peter goes on, ‘I was moved by his compassion, his intuition. I realised there was something formidable about what Robert was becoming.’

Although he revisits his youthful diaries, which provide most of the understated humour in the book, Peter has not relied solely on his own memories. He has interviewed many people who had a part in Robert’s story – the doctor who treated him in 1974, the nurse who was with him when he died in 1999, and many friends. Robert, along with his father, had a conspicuous gift for friendship, which Peter admired. Watching them together with their mates at a party one night, he says, ‘I was struck, as always, by their invincible camaraderie. How sane they were, and affable. I thought about what an extraordinary boon it had been for them joining Collingwood in their teens, instantly forming dozens of friendships, and retaining them for the rest of their lives. I did so without envy, for I had never aspired to this fraternity, but when I pondered my own world – solitary, bookish, egoistic, self-reliant – it seemed impoverished by comparison. Although there was something profoundly innocent, even boyish, about these men as they poured late beers and slapped each other on the back, I felt sure they knew something about kinship and contentment that the poets didn’t.’

Peter was in his late teens when Robert’s accident took place. He doesn’t belittle his own difficulties living in a household which revolved around an invalid who needed constant attention. He developed back problems from

the constant lifting necessitated by his brother's condition, but felt unable to complain about something so comparatively trivial. He found it impossible to study with the continual television and radio coverage of sport which Robert craved. He reported that 'you start to feel unworthy just because you move freely, or loath the trots, or want to drift.' His mother, wisely and bracingly, all but ordered him to leave home and make his own life. He in turn worried about his parents. 'Part of me – consciously, subconsciously, resented the demands Robert inevitably made on them. Part of me wanted it to end, I suppose. ... But I was sickened by my disloyalty.'

But recriminations against himself and others are few. In a memorable passage, Peter ponders his motives for writing *Rose Boys*. Troubled by John Bayley's books about his wife Iris Murdoch, he compares them with his own work. 'I still wonder about the propriety of writing such a book about a living spouse, however famous or senile. Isn't it otiose, even gratuitous? I have no intention of writing a second book about Robert. I'm not even sure I should be writing the first.' I am myself in two minds about John Bayley, but have no qualms about Peter Rose. He has told his family's story with admirable courage and candour.

Ultimately, all I want to say about *Rose Boys* is that you should read it. You won't be disappointed.