

BOOK REVIEW AND INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MARSDEN

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The bulk of Australia's refugee intake comes from places of instability and conflict. With *Home and Away*, John Marsden and Matt Ottley have produced a picture book that is confronting, upsetting and audacious—and not in a bad way.

The book's plot rests on a disturbing proposition: what if the refugees weren't coming to, but were from Australia? What if it was Melbourne, not Baghdad, being bombed?

When the unthinkable happens and war ravages Australia, an average family makes the decision to flee the ruins of their once safe land to a faraway place said to be peaceful and prosperous. Instead, they and their travelling companions are welcomed by soldiers, guns and barbed wire and are captured and detained.

While the pre-teen audience for *Home and Away* will be moved by the force of its narrative, adult readers will appreciate the way the book cleverly dismantles the arguments used to belittle so-called illegal arrivals. 'The Minister for Immigration says that we should have gone through the proper procedures,' says the 15-year-old narrator. 'Apparently there was a list or something and we should have found their office and put our names down.' This account of one of the responses to the asylum seekers (from the country they are seeking refuge in) follows the authors' graphic depictions of how war is instrumental in the disintegration of infrastructure, due process, and anything remotely resembling a functioning society. It underlines the absurdity of the 'queue jumper' myth, and in terms even a child could understand.

The value of *Home and Away* is its ability to humanise a demonised group, and to forcefully depict the devastating effects of displacement.

In brief with author John Marsden

MA: Who is the target audience for *Home and Away*?

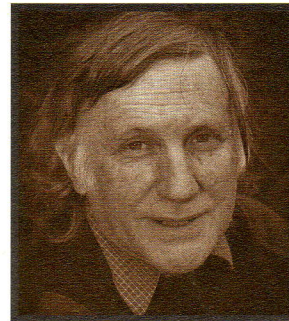
Home and Away is not a book I would give to young children. So I guess we're talking 10 or 11 up.

MA: What do you want readers to take away from the book?

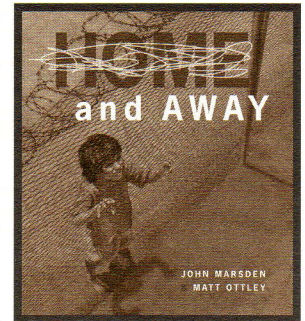
I would hate to think I'm coming from a 'What people need to understand is ...' approach, but I can't deny that this book is didactic. So I would say an increase in empathy.

MA: Why did you write this book? Was there a single event which led you to write this book?

In 1984, George Zubrzycki, Professor of Sociology at the Australian National University wrote an article for *The Age*, describing how a fleet of pleasure boats



Home and Away author John Marsden



Home and Away depicts the devastating effects of displacement.

surrounded a boatload of Vietnamese refugees when they arrived in Darwin Harbour. He said: 'The contrast between the dignified, clean, well-behaved, disciplined Vietnamese and their children and the surrounding "ocker" Australians could not have been greater. The men, with their big bellies hanging over their belts, were drinking beer, throwing beer cans into the harbour. They were surrounded by many underdressed young women. They were all gazing at the Vietnamese as if they were animals in a cage. They were not giving them any gifts, clothing or words of encouragement. They were just gazing.' I realised as I read this article that a massive shift in cultural attitudes was needed, or our society might go through quite a bitter period. In the same year I read an article about a book published in Russia by a returned Soviet diplomat. He described a 'typical conversation' between a visiting Russian and an Australian living here: 'Where are you from mate? USSR? What's that? ... They say you are all spies. Is it true, ha, ha, ha. Do you like Australia? Oh, good. Why don't you defect? All Russians defect. Ha, ha, ha, Russia, Siberia, very cold, brrr ...' It all rang horribly true. The cultural gap seemed immense.

MA: Whose responsibility is it to teach young people about the issues of tolerance raised in *Home and Away*?

I'm not sure why young people are always targeted as the group who need to be taught. Everyone in our society would benefit from a greater understanding of other cultures, and a more imaginative awareness of the difficulties that shunned and marginal people face everywhere.

MA: Do you think our younger generations have an understanding of the issues faced by refugees and asylum seekers?

I think that the current generation of young people is the most idealistic and knowledgeable that the world has ever seen. They may lack information on some issues, but they are generally empathetic and compassionate.