Jan Lahney

VIETNAM: A TIME OF RECKONING

*Hey Joe* — A novel for those too young to remember and those too old to forget

Hyde, Michael, 1945-. ISBN 0 9580794 4 7. 1. Title. A823.3

“Troops out. Troops out. 1–2–3–4. The Viet Cong will win the war” chanted the objectors. But nobody wins a war: not the anti-war campaigner, not the conscript with his gun, not the families who follow

*Hey Joe*, a teenage novel by educator and author, Michael Hyde, tells of a son guided by a collection of memories, letters, postcards and relayed messages, searching for his father and the life he could have had.

Hyde, acknowledging his own family, dedicates his novel, *Hey Joe*, to the spirit, sacrifices and rebelliousness of the generation that endured the Vietnam War and its effect on the peoples of South East Asia.

It was a turbulent time. America and Australia were part of an unpopular war, Ronald Ryan was being hung for the murder of a prison warden, blacks were not included in the census as Australian citizens, and the angry young men and women were revolting – against war, against authority, against injustice.

As he is driven away by antagonistic police from a 1968 fourth of July demonstration against American and Australian involvement in Vietnam, the character, Joe, knows he has crossed the Rubicon. The consequences will be dire, and they are.

Family, friends and foes are impacted in a double generational time frame that links the life experiences of Joe Thorn and his son, Jimi, the narrator of the tale. Emotional reflections from a son trying to piece together his father’s motivations, become poignant, when the son learns that his conscientious objector-father pushed family loyalties into second place, because of guilt he felt for a conscripted mate.

The theme of growth through the experience of travel in foreign lands has been effective since the days of *The Bible*, *Rasselas* and *Ulysses* and it works well in *Hey Joe*.

The didactic aspect of this novel of actions and consequences is obvious from the first page of the *Author’s Note*. In a short, sharp capsule of history, Hyde traces the evolution of The American War, (as it is known in Vietnam), and Australia’s commitment to prevent “the domino effect” which predicted the collapse of South East Asia under the yoke of communism and the presumed invasion threat to Australia.
Hyde steps easily from the Author’s Note into the prologue which submerges the reader in Joe’s stream of consciousness in his Notes for a Novel. The journal becomes an experiential map, throughout the book, for Jimi’s search, emotionally and physically, for a father who contributed little to his life.

Music of the Vietnam era, especially that of Jimi Hendrix, has a special place in the story. Joe’s son, Jimi, the narrator of story, is named after Hendrix and each chapter is named by a song title. Ain’t No Telling, Purple Haze, Who Knows, etc. all place their own enigmatic connotation on Michael Hyde’s storyline.

This writer of fiction, textbooks, plays and short stories paints two fairly stereotypical males, a generation apart, trying to make sense of life that pushes them across South East Asia searching for a dream.

Joe Thorn had come to Vietnam which was consistent with his dream to get away, a long way away. (129)

And after him had come the son,

Well I think it is good that you look for Mr. Joe. He is your father. Otherwise who will do it. (69)

Hyde’s ability as a storyteller is enhanced by his short, sharp, succinct descriptions that defy the reader’s senses not to be stimulated,

I hung out the window, breathing in the stale air, letting the wind blow through my sweaty hair and billow down my shirt. (50)

and Vietnam becomes real.

One smell after another assaulted me — sizzling woks, dog piss, fragrant flowers, open drains, diesel fumes. (50)

From fumes to the staccato firing of images at an anti-war demonstration... smoke bombs, chanting, Vietcong flags, banners and flagpoles, shattering glass, truncheons and coppers, police horses and rolling marbles, rocks and fireworks whistling through the air... (12)

the teacher-turned author makes the reader flinch from the closeness of the scene. However the repetition of this literary device lessens its impact. Despite life’s coincidences, the effect of Hey Joe is lessened when chance is taken to the extreme with letters, messages and people dove-tailing at the precisely correct moment.

The most powerful aspect of the book is the simplicity of the language and the flow of the storyline. Hyde’s experience in reading/writing programs, especially for boys, has given him an edge in creating a story that would appeal to the Australian male psyche. The sense of danger, potential discoveries just around the
corner, a romantic encounter and the depth of mateship make this tale a quick, interesting read for most. The current generation find it informative as well as an easy read. Talk of National Service, draft dodgers, moratoriums and riots will shake loose the memories of those who remember the highs and lows of the sixties and seventies. Hyde recalls that it was a time when Jesus was considered a social revolutionary and Labor's left wing seemed to be the solution for angry young men.

*Hey Joe* is published by The Vulgar Press who say their mandate is “the publication of working class and other radical forms of writing” and have “a good proportion of books able to be targeted at the secondary school/teen market.” (www.vulgar.com.au)

---

Noela McNamara

**THE OTHERLANDERS**


Miriel Lenore’s journey tracing the history of her great-grandmother Lizzie, is at once an historical, political, religious and personal recreation of an Irish immigrant's story. Lenore's poetry breathes life into Lizzie’s shadow, a girl leaving Ireland for Australia at the age of 17. In 1853 she crosses the ocean to reveal a true pioneer of the gold fields of Ballarat where she dies aged 74; one of the many women constantly but clinically outlined in our history books. The reader is made immediately aware of the mournful orthodoxy that accompanied such partings, especially since Australia's vast distance from Ireland dictated little chance of return:

on the quay a woman sobs
a man lifts his hand on a stick to signal
over the widening gulf
another woman turns her back to the ship
hides with her hand her eyes
a little boy in his best suit is troubled by
all this weeping

(the emigrant).

The continuity of the poems begs to be read from beginning to end and the succinct and economical language renders such task effortless and rewarding.

The poet's gift for interweaving the lives across time and distance is poignantly invoked in *how they get the faces they deserve*, where we witness the lifespan of four generations in two short stanzas:

---

LINQ