

Men on the mat

TIM KENNEDY HANNA

Killing Richard Dawson

By Robin Baker
Pantera Press, 315pp, \$24.95

Rocks in the Belly

By Jon Bauer
Scribe, 298pp, \$32.95

The Norseman's Song

By Joel Deane
Hunter Publishers, 223pp, \$32.95

Glissando: A Melodrama

By David Musgrave
Sleepers Publishing, 391pp, \$27.95

JUDGING by the narrators of these debut novels, the Australian male's losing battle against emotions is in full cry. Archie, in David Musgrave's *Glissando*, says his story is a meditation on "when I lost myself in that first great, passionate adventure and have suffered, it would seem, from a darkness of the heart ever since". As a boy he's abandoned, along with his half-brother Reggie, and raised by the theatrical Madame Octave. "I can still smell the dusty sunlight of those days," he recalls in a rare moment of warmth.

Madame Octave leads the boys to Fliss, a grandiose farmstead built by their migrant grandfather. Archie is abducted en route because of a feud between his family and the National Theatre, but he soon escapes. He arrives at Glissando, a second house built by the grandfather, whose diary it contains. Archie's adventure plays out in this discovery of Glissando and the diary, his subsequent arrival at Fliss to a brain-damaged but virtuosic Reggie, and an infatuation with Madame Octave's daughter that spans both houses.

Interwoven are the grandfather's self-important diary entries, detailing his architectural visions for the Australian wilderness.

I wish that I was not constrained to record these thoughts and sensations in this manner. That is, those thoughts and sensations which are not enshrined in the very bones, the wood and stone of the house I am building. I would have to build another house just to stand as my commentary on this one.

He does produce another house and commentary. These "fancies of a maniac", punctuated by descriptions of lowly craftsmen and delusional devotion to his deserted wife, serve as a parody of German romanticism and a reworking of Patrick White. Archie is oddly moved by the diarised rants. He attributes this sympathy to having developed "world-weariness and cynicism well before growing my first beard". Perhaps it's world-weariness that leads him further away from sensitive self-description, and into extended accounts of servants and the local theatre, where all characters are overtly ridiculous. We're shown "The Tragedy of King Hambethlo":

*HAMBETHLO: To eat or not to eat, that is the question.
I AMBO: 'Tis meet to eat, my Lord, and to eat often...*

Archie finds this play hilarious, and adopts a similar style in transcribing a long-winded conversation between grotesque theatre critics. Perhaps by now everything he remembers seems like an absurdist performance. Stronger feelings, such as heartbreak or mourning Reggie, are mostly glossed over. Archie's memory hasn't preserved them, and "there was no art for that grief". "The question," he writes, "is why I have written about that time in my life at all." His answer seems to be that the memoir has become a second self, "almost full to overflowing, but dead... until it comes to life in another's hands."

Archie's grandfather derided people's desperation to read life into "the most far-fetched and outlandish conceits" and "the most cynically bland narratives". But *Glissando* is a clever novel,



STURT KRYGSMAN

as aware of itself as it is of the literature it continually references. It's perfectly titled, in its likeness to a musical flourish with no lingering chords or insistent melody. Sitting somewhere between Baz Luhrmann and Samuel Beckett, it's an insight into how well a melodrama can suit a character who prefers to avoid narrating sincere emotions.

In *Killing Richard Dawson*, Robin Baker's narrator is so unpretentiously sincere about his desperation to avoid pain that I was grinning from the first lines.

Let me tell you something. Don't get excited, it's nothing earth shattering. [T]he guy who said, "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all", well, he really didn't have the slightest idea what the f...k he was talking about.

This character lost his dad as a boy and later came home to his mother's suicide. He's now an unmotivated undergraduate with a sometimes Salingeresque talent for expressing disgruntlement. "There's this little niggle in the back of my mind, like there's something wrong," he writes. "It takes me a moment to identify what the problem is, but then I remember it's just my life."

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His internal frankness is in contrast to his emotional illiteracy and illegibility around others. "There haven't been any dramas or anything?" asks his social worker.

"Nope. Everything's great."... We've been having these heart-to-heart talks for eight years now.

Evenings are spent "looking for fate in a nightclub", which involves clueless attempts to charm uninterested women. Biology is a handy cover for feelings here, especially when genuine romance seems possible with the kindly Jade. "My heart is thumping so hard it hurts," he explains, "though I know it's just my hypothalamus kicking in."

His friend George apparently knows him inside out. As the narrator's banal but compelling interactions with other friends become interrupted by tragedy and violence, George keeps advising not to sympathise. It leads to full-blown sociopathy. At a friend's funeral, the protagonist decides to wipe his eyes:

not because of any tears, just because it seems like the appropriate thing to do, be-

cause maybe a fake emotion is better than nothing.

The plot turns less original as it wades into a Macbethian bloodbath, and the touted final twists don't add much. The ending takes itself seriously in a way that's at odds with the rest of the book. None of this matters, though. The pleasure of the novel is its darkly hilarious knack for capturing the lethargic insights of gen Y, in a voice that Baker claims was an antidote to the teen television series *Dawson's Creek*. Baker's biggest fans will probably belong to the same generation, but anyone who enjoys the deadpan honesty of a smart teenager would be won over.

Joel Deane, a former chief speechwriter for Victorian premiers Steve Bracks and John Brumby, also seems to have an eye for contrived TV characterisations, albeit a complicit one. The cover blurb on *The Norseman's Song* promises "An ancient man without a past" and a "killer known only as the Norseman". However, the ancient man's past fills most of the book, and the killer is almost never called the Norseman. The Norwegian's diary begins the novel, after a prologue itemising the contents of a skin-bound journal delivered to the state librarian. This 19th-century

"... holding the head of that beautiful, dead woman... I felt something. Something akin to hope. She was dead, granted, but the way I felt about her... The way I felt was a revelation to me. A revelation; because, after all that had passed, I... had thought I could not possibly feel anything for another living being, so grievous were my sins. Yet, there I was, holding the head of a woman I did not know the name of, crying."

If you can accept this change, and the fact that it is spoken in conversation, the emotion might ring true. It's easier to believe in the more colloquial Farrell, who learns something about his toughness. Deane, a published poet, puts effort into imagery and rhythm, but it doesn't necessarily make for a gripping read. This is a novel by an author whose strengths lie in speechwriting.

Jon Bauer began in short fiction, as did *Rocks in the Belly* (in an issue of *Torpedo*). This is such a beautifully choreographed, sensitive and accessible novel, it's hard to believe it's Bauer's first. We meet the narrator at ages eight and 28, before and long after an accident involving his foster brother Robert that opens an emotional haemorrhage in his family. The eight-year-old pines after his inadvertently manipulative mother, who has embraced a succession of other families' sons. He's convinced the resentment that gets him into trouble would go away if only the other boys did.

Bauer offers the comical and painful perceptions of his child narrator with uncanny authenticity. It's a feisty but worried little boy who faces a psychologist's questions about his relationship with his mother, after he has deliberately burned himself in a fire. Jealousy over Robert, frustrated affection towards the mother and an ineffectually cheerful dad leave the protagonist anxious about his dark feelings, and it produces tantrums and bedwetting. "[C]hildren are sometimes the only ones brave enough to show the feelings that are really going on at home," the psychologist says. "Feelings are hard."

For the narrator at 28, reuniting with a widowed and terminally ill mother who never recovered from the accident that befell Robert, it has become preferable to suppress feelings via alcohol, sex and selfishness. His career as a prison warden, which he likens to how "people who want to be performers end up running theatres", has supposedly eradicated the last of his compassion.

He's faced with a mother whose cancer is ravaging body and brain:

[I'm] moving in and hugging her, my hips held away from hers. She smells of clothes that have been wet too long then dried, her body swollen but bird-like, frail. I stare out from the hug.

The scenes where he witnesses the feebleness of a woman who'd wielded so much power are horribly real:

[W]e're down now to the simplest cartoon shapes. This one is of a cat and Mum shrieks excitedly, pointing at Alfie, then puts her hand over her mouth to stop the demeaning release.

"Alfie," I say brightly, trying to encourage her.

"Oh it's Alfie, is it?" the nurse says. "I asked you that, didn't I, Mary? Didn't I ask you that?"

When alcohol, cynical seductions and more sinister tantrums end up yielding humiliation rather than distraction, the protagonist slides towards a confrontation with his mother and his involvement in Robert's accident. The rendering of this is never clichéd. And the adult's incisive cynicisms are a completely believable transition from the idiosyncrasies of the eight-year-old.

Bauer's orchestration of grief and comedy, innocence and pessimism is reminiscent of Kirsty Gunn's brilliant childhood tragedy *Rain*, and has an emotional honesty that matches the best Helen Garner. This book was a privilege to read.

These novels' narrators largely end their struggle against emotions in surrender, but the defeat proves far more interesting than victories were ever going to be. *