

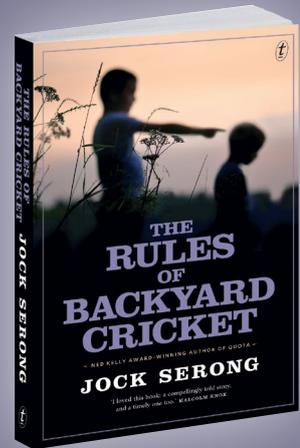
The Rules of Backyard Cricket



Jock Serong

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Praise for *The Rules of Backyard Cricket*

'Serong's writing displays wit, insight and occasionally, splendour, particularly during its atmospheric, heart-in-mouth final chapter.' Books & Publishing

'I loved this book. Jock Serong is a natural. He engages you with a vivid recreation of boyhood in 1970s Australian suburbia, while letting the darkness seep in page by page until you find yourself in the grip of an intense thriller.' Malcolm Knox

About Jock Serong

Jock Serong lives and works on the far southwest coast of Victoria. Formerly a lawyer, he is now a features writer, and the editor of *Great Ocean Quarterly*. His first novel, *Quota*, won the 2015 Ned Kelly Award for Best First Crime Novel. Jock is married with four children and lives in Port Fairy, Victoria.

A reader's introduction to *The Rules of Backyard Cricket*

As Darren Keefe is driven in the boot of a car to what he fears will be his violent death, he tells us the 'sequence of events, some predestined and some entirely of my own creation, that put me in the boot' (6). Perhaps we've all wondered how and why we've got where we are in life. But for Darren the question has particular urgency.

He first remembers back to his childhood and its three defining features: his hardworking single mum who puts her beloved boys first; his older brother, Wally, who is both his 'idol' and his 'inverse' (7); and cricket. That triptych remains constant as he grows up to become a state and national player, after his career ends, and as he becomes a commentator and minor celebrity. But his relationship with these three loves shift. And other things are added to the mix: his shady mate Craig,

his niece Hannah, a romance with Honey, drugs, and bad behaviour.

There is a constant tension between possibility and inevitability throughout this literary crime novel. As a child, Wally and Darren's cricketing talent seems to be leading to a glorious future. But their circumstances, their intensely competitive relationship, perhaps even their personalities contribute to the paths they end up taking. Their cricketing may be glorious but their lives are not always. Especially for Darren in the boot.

The Rules of Backyard Cricket is a novel with all the page-turning urgency of the crime genre it plays with. But it is about much more than plot. Serong applies a deft touch to the ideas he raises about masculinity, loyalty, sport, love, fate and morality.

Crime fiction typically ends with a revelation – whodunit, or why they did it, something related to the crime. That is true of this novel, but the revelations for Darren are also about his brother. And himself.

Questions for discussion

1. 'These people have a strong sense of genre,' Darren tells us about the men who have abducted him, although later he tells us they behave 'contrary to type' (258). The author too obviously has a strong sense of the crime genre. How closely does Serong stick to the conventions and how much does he play with them?
2. Darren remembers the 'wide, expanding future' that was an antidote to melancholy as a child (1). When did this sense of possibility disappear for Darren? Is this contracting of possibilities something we all experience?
3. How much responsibility does Darren have for what happens to him? What parts of his fate do you think

are 'predestined' and which are 'entirely of his own creation' (6)? What of Darren's comment that having his thumb destroyed hasn't changed his 'essential character' (147)?

4. Darren tells Honey that he behaves badly because people expect it of him. Honey replies that this is 'the weakest thing you've ever said' (146). Who do you agree with? Does Darren himself believe what he says here? How true is it in life that people's expectations define us?
5. Is Darren's 'indefinable sorrow in the night' that tells him that of the 'vast, immeasurable silence that awaits' (2) something we all experience, or is it peculiar to him? How does that melancholy affect him throughout the novel?
6. What is this book saying about masculinity? Are Darren, Wally and Craig 'typical' men? Are they products of a society that has particular expectations of and about men? Talk about how sport defines masculinity in the novel, as well as in the world.
7. Is it significant that Darren and Wally grew up fatherless? Does the novel imply that their father's absence somehow harmed them?
8. Darren and Wally's relationship has been defined by both the ultra-competitive desire to beat each other and the drive to hurt each other. On the other hand, Darren loves Wally. When Hannah disappears, Darren wants 'to clutch at him, to find my beloved brother in his sorrow, there beneath his rage' (178). Is theirs an extreme example of a typical sibling relationship, or a completely different sort of sibling relationship?
9. Do you think Darren believes what he says in his speech for Wally's retirement about Darren sacrificing himself for Wally's achievements (221)?
10. When Darren sees Wally in the forest, searching through the burning car, he realises for the first time ever that he doesn't know who his brother is (286).

Aside from not knowing about Wally's involvement in match fixing, what else did Darren have wrong about him. Did you trust and believe Darren's descriptions of Wally? Do you think we can ever really know someone? Is it harder or easier to truly know family?

11. In the same scene he remembers the time he destroyed his brother's prized copy of Bradman's *Art of Cricket*. He identifies that as the 'beginning. The beginning of my clumsy habit. Of your refusal ever to care again' (287). Do you think this is the moment that leads to the culmination of the complex relationship between the brothers? Is it possible to identify a single moment that sets a train of events in motion?
12. Realising his small family is fracturing one Christmas as his mother's dementia progresses, Darren says 'We're vulnerable to dissolution in a way that I know families aren't meant to be' (136). Why is his family particularly vulnerable? Are other families actually less vulnerable?
13. For two years, Darren tells us, 'I hit a still point, where the better side of me is given air and water and light. Honey Nicholson plays an ingenious hand early on' (100). Is this the only chance Darren had for redemption? Is it significant that it's a woman who offers him this possibility?
14. Darren calls his mother the 'core' of their world. Talk about her importance to Darren and Wally, and her place in the book. You might also want to discuss the roles of the other women in the book.
15. 'Sport goes to the heart of everything. If you can reach inside it and fuck with its innards, you're actually messing with society... People will go on consuming sport long after they know it's rotten to the core' (266). Do you agree with all or any of these three parts to Craig's insight?
16. Darren often tries but struggles to behave morally. How far does he succeed and fail? Who are the moral characters in this book, if any?