

BOOK REVIEW

Peter Rose, *Rose Boys*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2001, 289pp, illus, \$29.95.

I remember as a ten-year-old following the cricket career of Robert Rose and still recall his free flowing batting style. He batted a bit like Mark Waugh although he was not as compact a player. This was at Adelaide Oval in the summer of 1973 when Rose defied the South Australian bowling attack in an opening stand of 217 with Paul Sheahan. I also remember reading about his 'golden pair' against Queensland when he was dismissed by the left arm swing bowling of Tony Dell in each innings. I wondered whether Rose would be selected for Australia when they toured the West Indies that year.

Robert Rose was a rare sportsman. Not only was he a first class cricketer but he was also a league footballer with Collingwood and later Footscray. He seemed to have the sporting world at his feet. I also remember the shock of hearing about his car accident and the news that he was paralysed. He was just 22 years old.

My final childhood connection with Rose closed with a haunting picture from an Australian Cricket magazine. It depicted him lying in a hospital bed with shaven head and metallic objects applying traction to his neck. He did not look anything like the man I had seen at the Adelaide Oval. In subsequent years I often wondered what had become of that wiry looking blonde batsman who looked more like a recalcitrant schoolboy than a potential test cricketer.

Twenty-seven years later Peter Rose, Robert's brother, has written *Rose Boys*, the story of Robert Rose's life-a life lived in two parts. It is also a study of the many ways in which his injury impacted upon the Rose family. The author is the editor of the *Australian Review of Books* and is well placed to write such an account. He has written a sensitive family portrait involving adversity, prolonged grief, loss and fraternity. Almost three decades after the accident some of my questions about Robert Rose have been answered.

For this book Rose has interviewed family members, close companions of his brother as well as several associated doctors and nurses in addition to consulting his own journal of diary writings. This is an account written from a compassionate perspective but by one who has also managed to obtain some sense of objectivity about his family's life together. The story of the Rose family is set in the backdrop of the Melbourne sporting milieu in the 1970s. The sporting fraternity is far reaching and many well known personalities are mentioned in the book. This tale provides a wonderful example of how an extended family helps each other out in times of trouble.

Rose Boys is stylishly presented as a 289-page, A5 hardback and is complemented by family photos. A poignant image on the books cover offers a window to the author's childhood. The picture depicts a family portrait of Bob Rose proudly overlooking his two young sons, Robert and Peter. The boys are captured sitting side by side innocently unaware of the future horrors that wait. It reveals a serene moment a lifetime away from the events covered in the story.

During the 1950s and 1960s the athletic brilliance of Bob Rose and his brother Kevin shone brightly over the playing fields of the Victorian Football League. In the 1970s it was the turn of Robert Rose to star. He was a rare breed of sportsman (almost extinct today) who played elite level football and first class cricket. During this time his younger brother pursued more cerebral challenges that later led to a philosophy degree at university and a career as a book publisher and a poet.

It is well documented that Robert's sporting career ended on Valentine's Day in 1974 when he was seriously injured after attending a country race meeting. His white Volkswagen collided with a semi-trailer in a collision that left Rose paralysed. His travelling companions although thrown from the car escaped serious injuries. What is less known are the extreme obstacles that the Rose family had to deal with as a result of the accident, which left their son trapped in a body with only minor movement. For an athlete it is the cruellest blow. For the family who must care for a quadriplegic son it is worse.

The book begins with a description of a haunting dream that provides an insight into Peter's emotional state for many years after the accident. In the dream Peter travels alone through the scrub past familiar family landmarks toward the chaos of a burning library. He encounters a Christ-like figure, whom he refers to as the oracle, perched in a block of flats overlooking the destructive scene. The figure mocks the victims before preparing to address Peter. The oracle it appears was his brother Robert.

Dreams provide an avenue for the expression of unresolved feelings and the concept of dreaming is one of the several themes explored in this book. Another observation is the insight his brother gained from adversity. The author expresses admiration for his brother's perception of human traits, a perspective gained during a 25-year period in which he was entombed in a near motionless state and fully dependent on others.

It is only after his Robert's death in 1999 that Peter decided to write his family's history. He began his research in Adelaide by delving into old scrapbooks owned by his brother and father. Such artefacts provide an aperture to the past and are described by the author as 'curious documents, these bibles of scrap, and collages of self-delight'. They provide a glimpse into the past and the events of Valentines' Day 1974. The anniversary of the accident became a time for the coming together of family and friends to talk about Robert's life. It is a day in which the unseen casualties of the accident can share a common ground.

Rose's observations about the life of a quadriplegic offer some particular insights. For example although Robert's spinal injuries rendered him incapable of playing any sport his passion for it lived on. He regularly attended Collingwood games and greatly enjoyed watching the Kerry Packer innovation of World Series Cricket. In a time of inadequate funding, television has become the 'opiate of the quadriplegic'.

Rose Boys is also a story about people who exist on the perimeters of society. The author, a literary minded young man in a sporting household sees himself as living in a different universe from his father and brother. He

appreciates their athletic brilliance but never aspired to be like them. Peter is bookish and introspective while his elder brother was gregarious in nature. Ironically after the accident the two brothers share the common bond of a sense of social isolation. While in many ways the brothers' lives are incomparable there are some unspoken commonalities. Peter travels around the globe to try to confront some of his inner turmoil while Robert struggles to cope with life as a quadriplegic in a sanitised and sterile hospital room.

This is also a story about relationships and how they can break down in the face of enormous pressure. Robert's marriage ended a few years after the accident. He and his wife Terry were young with a 6-week-old baby. The difficulties faced proved overwhelming for such an immature marriage that had already been fraught with trouble. In an interesting insight into life after the accident Rose reveals that Terry eventually remarried and Robert developed a significant relationship with one of his female carers.

The real heroes of this book are the Rose parents, Bob and Elsie, who were unrelenting and unquestioning in support of their damaged son. Despite the obstacles family members tried to lead as normal a life as possible. Bob continued to coach and develop business pursuits while Peter continued through university and became an editor at Australian Oxford Press.

Also central to this story are the doctors and nurses who looked after Robert. The medical staff concerned is portrayed in a positive light as they grappled with the many difficulties to be confronted when dealing with people whose lives are forever changed by quadriplegia. A cruel irony occurred a year after the accident when Neil Sasche, a Footscray player under the guidance of Bob Rose as coach, became the VFL's only paraplegic casualty in an on-field collision. The incident occurred almost a year to the day after the injury to Robert (the opposition coach of Fitzroy was Bobs brother Kevin). In a case of history repeating, Rose attended the same hospital and talked with the same doctors as he had done a year earlier. It was as if the nightmare had happened all over again.

The author considers his motives for writing such a book that is full of family intimacies. But he is after all a writer and the story is an intriguing one. One suspects though that the writing of this story has played a cathartic role for him. Perhaps it has enabled the release of demons that have haunted Peter since his brother's accident now decades ago.

Rose Boys is a profoundly moving tale and also a story of love and hope. It highlights the difficulties faced by everyday people when confronted with the most difficult of circumstances. There is a quote at the front of the book from Randall Jarrell that best sums up the book's essence, 'Living is more dangerous than anything'. Most importantly it reminds us of the perils of every day life and the importance of making the most of whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

Barry Nicholls