

Peter Corris, *The Winning Side*. George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984; pp:184; \$5.95 paper;

The Winning Side has a winning formula as a work of popular fiction with a strong and relevant social message for modern Australia. Corris has presented a series of vignettes which could easily pass as a collection of short stories. They are held together as a novel by the life and times of Charlie Thomas a part Aboriginal - part Welsh Queenslander living through fifty years of enormous social and cultural change in Australia. Thomas's racial mix is significant: both Aborigines and the Welsh have struggled to maintain their particular cultures in the face of English dominance. In this sense *The Winning Side* falls somewhere between Thomas Kenneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* and Richard Llewelyn's *How Green Was My Valley*.

The Winning Side opens on an Aboriginal mission in the north of Queensland - Xavier Herbert's Country - with the young Charlie Thomas learning to box, a skill which helps him through life and earns him a degree of acceptance within white society where he chooses to live, throwing off traditional ways, after escaping the mission with a boxing troupe touring country towns and the outback during the 1930s. Lurking in the back of Charlie's mind always is the prospect of having a 'crack' at the big-time in the cities.

Any such prospects, however, are destroyed by the advent of World War Two. Charlie promptly enlists and is later cited for bravery after serving in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. Returning to Australia in 1946, Charlie drifts for a while and then becomes a sports writer for a Sydney newspaper where he covers, among other sports, the one he had once hoped to succeed in.

In the late 1950s Charlie moves to northern NSW for a brief stint as a partner on a fishing boat and is unsuccessful in preventing racial conflict in the small fishing village. From NSW Charlie moves to Melbourne where he becomes a social worker with delinquent kids living in the slums of South Melbourne, St Kilda and Collingwood. While in Melbourne Charlie reads Frank Hard's *Power Without Glory*, a novel which has had an obvious influence on Corris.

While in Melbourne, Charlie reacquaints himself with the boxing world by training one of his charges who, in all likelihood, would have ended up in gaol without Charlie's steadying influence. It is not all smooth-sailing, however, and a Jewish youth under Charlie's care fall foul of the police. Charlie eventually returns to Sydney with his newly-wed wife, Kelly, where he becomes the mediator between moderate and militant Aborigines. The old ways of reform which Charlie supports are rejected by a new generation of disaffected urban Aborigines. Charlie's plight to bring black and white together roughly parallels that of Martin Luther King and ends in a similar fashion with the death of Charlie.

In writing *The Winning Side* Peter Corris has chosen to use the formula which made *A Fortunate Life* so popular and eventually a mini series. A cynical mind might link the fortunes of Corris's *The Empty Beach*, which has also recently been translated onto the tube, with the style and structure of *The Winning Side*; but, Corris is to be congratulated on the way he has balanced social conscience with popularfictionone of the hardest tasks of any modern writer of popular literature. *The Winning Side* would make a marvellous TV series thus reaching further into the audience at which this novel is directed. As a work of Australian fiction *The Winning Side*, stands as a reverse side of Albert Facey's coin of fortune.

Richard A. Nile
University of New South Wales