

Empathetic tale of a family in crisis - Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - October 13, 2018 - page 17

October 13, 2018 | Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) | Suzanne Leal | Page 17

Bridge of Clay By Markus Zusak Picador, 580pp, \$39.99 (HB), \$32.99 (PB)

Markus Zusak's new novel, *Bridge of Clay*, has been described by his publisher as the most anticipated book of the decade. It is a big claim. It also might be true. For *Bridge of Clay* is Zusak's first book in 13 years.

Between 1999, when he published his debut, *The Underdog* — the first in a young adult series about hapless teenager Cameron Wolfe — and 2005, the year of *The Book Thief*, which has since become a worldwide publishing phenomenon, Zusak published three other novels: *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, *When Dogs Cry* and *The Messenger*. And then, nothing. For year after year, nothing.

In media interviews, Sydney-based Zusak has been honest about his difficulties with the manuscript he describes as the story of a boy called Clay who builds a bridge. After a particularly difficult time grappling with the work, Zusak's wife, Mika, gave him an ultimatum in 2016. "I think you and Clay need a break," she told him. "If you can't get this together in the next week, get it back on track, you've got to quit the book." The ultimatum spurred Zusak on to complete the tome.

And at 580 pages, it is quite a tome. Less linear than *The Book Thief*, *Bridge of Clay* propels the reader backwards and forwards in time, the pace fast and jaunty as we are brought into the messy world of the once cohesive, now fractured Dunbar family.

Set in Australia, the narrative revolves around the five young Dunbar brothers: Matthew, who is the narrator; Clay, who is at the centre of the story; their two elder brothers, Rory and Henry; and Tommy, the baby of the family.

Absent through her early death, but never far from the boys' thoughts, is their mother, Penny Dunbar (nee Lesciuszko), who as a young woman had fled the repression of her Eastern Bloc homeland. Absent, too, has been the boys' father, Michael Dunbar, unable to cope with the death of his wife and having left his sons to fend for themselves.

It is Michael Dunbar's tentative return to the family home with an odd proposition for the boys — to help him build a bridge on the remote property where he now lives — that opens the narrative of this love and empathy-filled saga of a family in crisis.

Animals as well as people play their part, adding to the already vivid picture of the shambolic household of the Dunbar boys. For each of the five boys there is an animal, including a mule called Achilles and a pigeon called Telemachus. It is a nod to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, references to

which wind their way through a book that is an odyssey in itself: a journey home from the wilderness of grief, anger, sadness and isolation.

The poetic meter of Zusak's writing is clear and strong, propelling the reader forward as though on horseback. He makes good use of his distinctive rhythmic narrative to introduce us to the chaotic Dunbar boys:

Many considered us tearaways.

Barbarians.

Mostly they were right: Our mother was dead.

Our father had fled.

We swore like bastards, fought like contenders, and punished each other at pool, at table tennis (always on third-or-fourth-hand tables, and often set up on the lumpy grass of the backyard), at Monopoly, darts, football, cards, at everything we could get our hands on.

We had a piano no-one played.

Our TV was serving a life sentence.

The couch was in for twenty.

Despite the appeal of Zusak's meter, it is not an easy introduction to the Dunbar family and the narrative is sometimes confusing in its early pages. The novel soon hits its stride, however, and the ensuing description of Penny Dunbar's early life, her migration to Australia and her romance with the man she will marry is touching and powerful.

Most moving is Zusak's description of Penny's illness and its devastating effect on her family:

The next night Penny told us, in the kitchen; cracked and sadly broken. Our father in several fragments.

I remember it all too clearly — how Rory refused to believe it, and how soon he'd gone berserk, saying "What?" and "What?" and "WHAT?" He was wiry-hard and rusty. His silver eyes were darkening.

And Penny, so slim and stoic: She steadied towards matter-of-fact.

Her own eyes green and wild.

Her hair was out and open, and she repeated herself, she said it: "Boys, I'm going to die."

Zusak is a writer of extraordinary empathy and he excels in his understanding of adolescent boys. His descriptions of the older Dunbar boys — whose confusion becomes anger; whose sadness

becomes silence — are subtle and moving, and in his portrayal of the gently traumatised Clay he has created a memorable character to savour.

Zusak has described *Bridge of Clay* as “almost like a marriage of all the books I’ve written, to become one book”. It is an apt description of a work that focuses on the lives of five adolescent boys struggling to come to terms with the early death of their mother and their unexplained abandonment by their father.

In the narrator, Matthew Dunbar, there are splashes of Ed Kennedy from *The Messenger* and traces of the humour of Cameron Wolfe, the engaging narrator in Zusak’s earlier books. Like *The Messenger*, *Bridge of Clay* is a deft exploration of masculinity and an insightful depiction of young men in crisis. And in *Bridge of Clay*, as earlier in *The Book Thief*, Zusak has succeeded in creating a story so vibrant and so real that the reader feels enveloped by it.

Bridge of Clay is a book of many characters and Zusak brings them all to life, implanting each of their quirks, their regrets, their ambitions and their hidden sadnesses into our mind. Once again, Zusak has created a world for his readers: a modern Australian world infused with a European past, a world filled with flawed characters who struggle with life and who do what they can in difficult times, even if it may not be nearly enough. Zusak’s empathy and love for this flawed world permeate his writing and make this new book shine. **Suzanne Leal’s** most recent novel is *The Teacher’s Secret*.