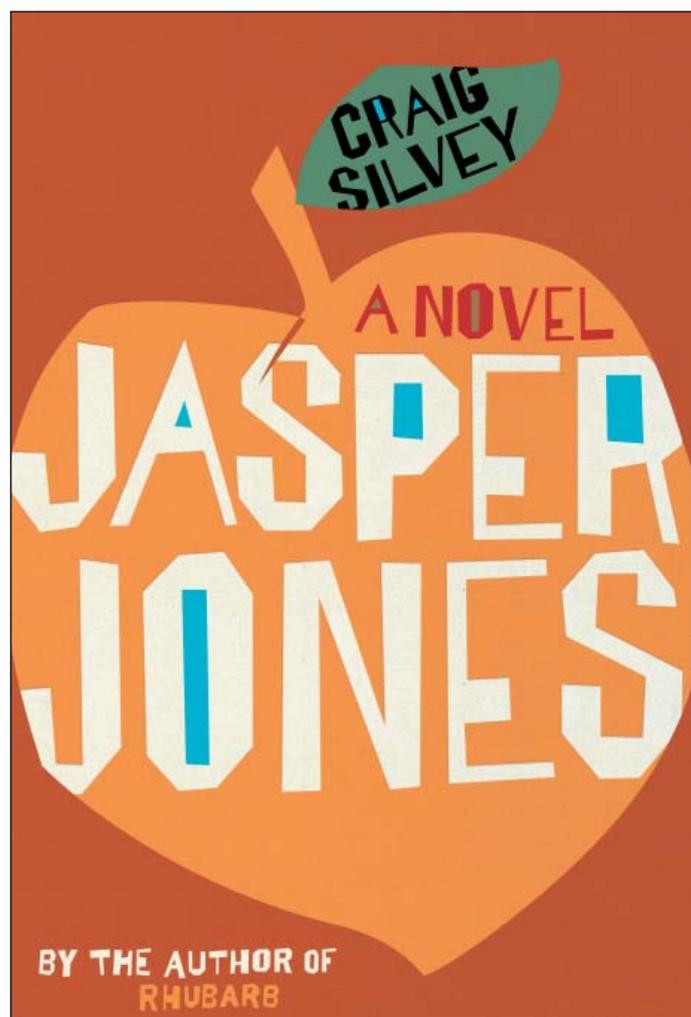


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the Author

Craig Silvey grew up on an orchard in Dwellingup Western Australia. He now lives in Fremantle, where at the age of 19 he wrote his first novel, *Rhubarb*, published by Fremantle Press in 2004. In 2005, *Rhubarb* was chosen as the 'One Book' for the Perth International Writers' Festival, and was included in the national Books Alive campaign. Silvey also received a Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Novelist Award. In 2007, Silvey released *The World According To Warren*, a picture book affectionately starring the guide-dog from *Rhubarb*. His second novel, *Jasper Jones*, was completed with the aid of an Australia Council New Work Grant. Outside of literature, Silvey is the singer/songwriter for the band The Nancy Sikes!

About the Book

Late on a hot summer night in the tail end of 1965, Charlie Bucktin, a precocious and bookish boy of thirteen, is startled by an urgent knock on the window of his sleep-out. His visitor is Jasper Jones, an outcast in the regional mining town of Corrigan. Rebellious, mixed-race and solitary, Jasper is a distant figure of danger and intrigue for Charlie. So when Jasper begs for his help, Charlie eagerly steals into the night by his side, terribly afraid but desperate to impress.

Jasper takes him through town and to his secret glade in the bush, and it's here that Charlie bears witness to Jasper's horrible discovery. With his secret like a brick in his belly, Charlie is pushed and pulled by a town closing in on itself in fear and suspicion as he locks horns with his tempestuous mother; falls nervously in love and battles to keep a lid on his zealous best friend, Jeffrey Lu.

And in vainly attempting to restore the parts that have been shaken loose, Charlie learns to discern the truth from the myth, and why white lies creep like a curse. In the simmering summer where everything changes, Charlie learns why the truth of things is so hard to know, and even harder to hold in his heart.

Craig Silvey on writing *Jasper Jones*

Jasper Jones began as a name that wouldn't let me go. I tried, but I couldn't shrug it away, and it began to occupy my thoughts at a time when they should have been elsewhere. I was in the midst of a slow moving second novel and living my own private sophomore slump. In short, I was panicking.

I had this insistent story buzzing with energy, but I was married to a sluggish behemoth that was burgeoning out of my grasp and gradually becoming more oblique in its scope and purpose. I had a decision to make: impulsively follow *Jasper Jones* down to his glade in the dead of night, or see this thing through which I instinctively knew wasn't working. For a fastidious little man who stubbornly needs to shepherd things to their bitter end, the decision was a difficult one. But *Jasper Jones* was beckoning me all too urgently, and, like Charlie Bucktin, I followed Jasper through the town of Corrigan with trepidation.

Fuelled by the guilt of shelving what was my second book, I embarked upon *The-Year-Of-Getting-It-Done*, a foetid haze of twelve hour days when I rarely saw sunlight, and sought every excuse to remain burrowed in my Quasimodo hovel of self-indulgence.

Until eighteen months later, after *Jasper Jones* had gripped me so tightly in the beginning, I was finally prepared to let him go.

I've always been attracted to Southern Gothic fiction. There's something very warm and generous about those regional American writers like Twain and Lee and Capote, and it seemed to be a literary ilk that would lend itself well to the Australian condition. So I finished up with this strange little amalgam: a coming-of-age, regional mystery novel, stuffed inside a nervous little love story, garnished with family drama and adolescent escapism and anguish. And then there's Jeffrey Lu, who, I have to say, I wish were my best friend. I think Jeffrey might well be my proudest literary creation.

I wanted to explore a lot of things with this book, but one of my primary areas of consideration was the sloughing of innocence that is growing up, that moment where the bubble is burst and you're suddenly exposed to the real truth of things and the blind trust of childhood dissolves. What I try to address in *Jasper Jones* is that some folks learn to live as adults, but never quite grow up. They live without that critical filter, still inside that bubble, protecting its thin skin by still subscribing to the same myths that they've always abided by. And it's an insular way to live: fearful and insecure. And so there's this kind of dichotomy, where you can choose to know, to learn and challenge and question, which can be a sad, lonely and isolating thing, but ultimately a brave act; or you can never challenge that status quo, which invites the fear of the unknown, and allows myth and tradition to flourish. It's really that point that I wanted to test Charlie with: the burden of knowing, and the comfort of not-knowing. One being ultimately powerful, the other very fragile.

And so one of the reasons I set the book in the sixties, other than the fact that it dovetailed well with the southern gothic angle, was that the mid-sixties were supposed to be that watershed moment where Australia truly grew up. But one of the reasons that the period is so easily identifiable and recognisable in the book is because, well, maybe we really didn't. Maybe we just learned to be adult, rather than to really come of age.

Discussions Questions

-  When you first read of Jasper's discovery in the clearing, who did you think was the culprit?
-  Do you think that Charlie did the right thing in helping Jasper?
-  Why do you think Charlie agreed to become an accomplice?
-  Did you ever have a friend like Jeffrey?
-  What do you think the novel says about Australia in the middle of the Twentieth century?

- ☞ Which of the characters do you think is the most courageous?
- ☞ Discuss the role of the 'Boo Radley' character in the children's collective imagination.
- ☞ What impact do you think the discovery of his mother's transgression had on Charlie?
- ☞ Do you think that the novel accurately captures the experience of adolescence, if so, in what ways?
- ☞ Would you choose the spider hat or penis fingers?

Reviews

'Craig Silvey's *Rhubarb* was one of my favourite Australian novels of 2004 and heralded a major new voice in Australian literary fiction. His next offering in *Jasper Jones* is another beautifully constructed book with a page-turning narrative and outrageously good dialogue ... A meditation on innocence, yearning and coming of age in a quintessentially Australian setting, I have no doubt this novel will further cement Craig's place at the forefront of the next generation of Australian novelists.'

Dr Wendy Were, Artistic Director and Chief Executive, Sydney Writers' Festival

Recommended Reading

- ☞ *To Kill a Mockingbird* Harper Lee
- ☞ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain