

Christopher Bantick's review of Hey Joe: 'Days of the purple HAZE' (Sunday Tasmanian. 21/9/04).

The Vietnam War is not a topic which has been covered extensively in Australian fiction. Michael Hyde's novel Hey Joe changes this.

The book is written for an audience, Hyde says, 'between 16 and 22 years old.'

His reasoning is, 'This is the generation which was born after the Vietnam War.'

To say the book is about Vietnam is in one sense only part of the story. Hey Joe is also about the search by a son for his father.

Both these narrative threads combine to make a strong storyline and a memorable book.

Hyde was a radical student during the Vietnam War days at Monash University. It was there he met Jim Bacon who will launch the book in Tasmania tomorrow.

Hyde fondly recalls his disruptive days with the now Tasmanian Premier.

'I shared a student house with Jim', he says.

'We were hooked up at Monash as part of the antiwar movement. I think I may have even joined him up with the Monash Labor Club.'

At the heart of Hey Joe is the discomfort, Hyde believes, much of Australia still feels about Vietnam.

The story is written from Jimi's point of view. He is in search of Joe Thorn, his father, and he undertakes a kind of Apocalypse Now journey into his own heart of darkness in Vietnam.

Joe was a radical activist and Hyde says he drew on his past to develop the story.

'I don't believe Australia has ever dealt adequately with Vietnam. It is hard to find a politician today who says they supported the war.'

When thinking about Vietnam, Australia has often looked, rightly, at the veterans but not the people who protested.

‘As an activist of those days, I don’t think the story I, and many others, lived has been given anywhere near the attention it deserved.

‘In Australia the protest movement against the war was huge. In terms of the ratio of protestors to population, Australia far outstripped America and France for the size of the anti-war movement.’

Hyde says he has attempted to reclaim some of the lost ground that has been taken by the official interpretation of the Vietnam War.

Yet, what he shows is something much larger. This is the enduring impact the Vietnam War had on a generation.

Jimi’s search for his father is really a metaphor for a journey into himself and a journey the Vietnam generation has still, in some ways, largely to make.

His search for his lost father is a search for belonging and identity.

Hyde evokes the sense of lost idealism well and also describes Vietnam in graphic detail. Where the novel moves beyond the preoccupation of a son in search of a father, is in its allegorical treatment of Vietnam.

Jimi seeks meaning from his militant past. Ironically, it is the Vietnamese people who make this possible.

Central as Vietnam is to the story, Hey Joe transcends the war. The novel reminds us of a strong theme in Australian society more broadly: how many Australian men glean their identity through war. Hyde puts it this way: ‘One of the great Australian cultural stories is the way a son moves to understand his father.

‘In Australia, maleness has, to some extent, been measured by going to war.

‘In one sense war defines masculinity for some men. It is easily seen what men are supposed to do. During the Vietnam War this was not protesting.’

With the resonance of Jimi Hendrix in the title and his songs heading each chapter, Hey Joe is a book which captures the period of the Vietnam War easily.

It is an important novel which breaks a long silence.