



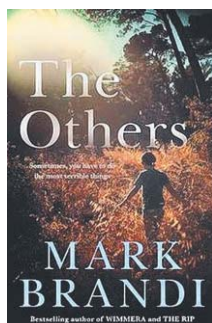
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The road to dystopia

Weekend Australian, Australia

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THE OTHERS
By Mark Brandi
Hachette, 384pp, \$26.99

Suzanne Leal

Born in Italy, raised in country Victoria and with a background in criminal justice, Mark Brandi first came to attention with his debut novel, *Wimmera*. It was a story of friendship, danger and toxic masculinity for which he won the British Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger Award and the best debut prize at the Australian Indie Book Awards.

Wimmera was followed by

The Rip, which explores the confronting world of drug addiction and homelessness. Both are stories of outsiders, and it is to the outsider that Brandi returns with his new novel, ***The Others***.

Laden with a strong sense of foreboding, *The Others* is the story of Jacob, a boy entering his teenage years, who lives in the wilderness with his father. Theirs is a solitary life and the world Jacob describes is a dystopian one, beset by a plague from which father and son have sought to escape.

Finding refuge deep in the bush, they install themselves

in a rundown farmhouse where they strive for a life of self-sufficiency. There they survive on a diet of goat meat, supplemented by the oats and tins of baked beans Jacob's father brings home with him on trips out into the plague-ridden outside world, while Jacob remains alone and hidden in their remote hideaway.

On the days he stays home, Jacob's father haphazardly educates his son. There are few

possessions in this ramshackle household, but there is a dictionary and it is to the dictionary Jacob turns to increase his knowledge. A clever and curious boy, Jacob is a keen observer of his wilderness home and documents his thoughts and observations in his diary, a gift from his father for Jacob's 11th birthday.

So, too, Jacob copies into his diary new words and their meanings, supplementing them with pictures of a distant world he can only imagine: pictures that are reproduced in the novel itself. It's an effective inclusion in the work, serving to bring the reader even closer to the story's engaging young narrator.

Jacob did not always live alone with his father in the wilderness. Jacob's mother was once with them but she is dead now, victim to the unnamed plague that has been ravaging the outside world. This is a world of many dangers, including those Jacob's father calls "the others", whose identity is never revealed but who must be avoided lest they destroy father and son and the life they have made together.

Slowly, however, and despite their attempts to hide

from it, the outside world begins to close in on them.

The world of *The Others* is a foggy one, and to situate ourselves in time and place we must follow the clues Brandi has hidden carefully and reveals only slowly. It's a clever device that keeps the reader looking and guessing.

In this narrative of uncertain time and location, Brandi uses prose that is sparse and evocative to place Jacob and his father within a landscape of gum trees and wattlebirds and magpies that is so clearly Australian but, for almost all of the narrative, is not named.

So, too, we are left to puzzle out when, exactly, this apparently futuristic story takes place as Brandi teases us with hints contained in the dog-eared entertainment magazines Jacob pores through to try to understand the world he and his father have left behind.

These are clever devices employed by Brandi who, within the vagueness of the dystopia of the outside world, shines a clear and incisive light on this intense father-son relationship.

In this way – and I am not the first to muse on it – *The Others* brings to mind *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Like *The Road*, *The Others* is set in a world that appears to be on the brink of collapse; and, like the father and son in *The Road*, Jacob and his father

have only each other to rely on. But where McCarthy explores the abiding, overwhelming love of a father for a son despite the horror around him, the relationship Brandi describes between Jacob and his father is laced with a strong



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sense of foreboding that rises as the story unfolds.

As Brandi pulls the reader into Jacob's world, a feeling of claustrophobia begins to fill the narrative, similar to the atmosphere that pervades Emma Donoghue's compelling work, *Room*. Here, too, we have a young, guileless narrator whose curiosity and sense of hope, we come to suspect, is at odds with the situation in which he finds himself.

Brandi is a careful, observant writer and in sparse, crisp prose he considers the brooding, remote world that surrounds his young narrator, populated by those he knows only as "the others".

"My father has never explained, not completely, who the others are. And I can tell he doesn't like talking about it. But I know a bit from what I've asked, from what he's told me.

"They live over the hill, and only come out when it's dark.

"In the house, at night, I mostly feel safe. Sometimes I hear noises like the fence

creaking, wires bending – sometimes I think the others are coming, coming right up to the house.

"I close my eyes and try to listen."

For the first half of the novel, curiosity and a desire to understand the nub of the relationship between Jacob and his father propelled my reading, quickly drawing me into the narrative.

Later, my attention drifted and I began to question where the story was headed. By its concluding chapters, however, the pace of the narrative picked up once more as it headed towards a denouement that was both shocking and completely riveting.

The Others is a nuanced exploration of the world view of a child whose life is curtailed and limited but whose curiosity and exuberance cannot be curbed. In Jacob, Brandi has created a memorable young narrator, and in *The Others* he has continued, with compassion and intelligence, to explore the place of the outsider

in a world that is not always as safe or welcoming as we might hope.

Suzanne Leal is the host of *Thursday Book Club*. Her novel, *The Deceptions*, won the 2020 *Nib People's Choice Prize*.