

Mark Brandi

The Others

Books



Hachette Australia, 373pp, \$32.99

Who – or what – are The Others? This question is asked from the opening pages of Mark Brandi's exquisite new novel.

Are they devilised humans, as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*? Are they members of an off-the-grid cult? Are they something other than human? Or are they not real at all, the figments of an unhinged mind or a child's naive misunderstanding of the adult world?

Brandi sets up an uncertain physical and psychological landscape through his narrator, 11-year-old Jacob, who tells the story through his diary, complete with sketches. This is what we think, based on what Jacob writes and draws: he lives with his father on a remote farm and is not allowed to leave it; his mother has been "gone a long time" and he can barely recall her; they once lived in a town, then a commune.

The drought means there are no crops, so they live on goats and rabbits, which his father shoots and traps and keeps in a pit. The rifle is also protection from The Others, who "live over the hill and only come out when it's dark". They must not be allowed on the farm.

The boy knows not to ask his father too much. He doesn't want to be belted with the "bendy stick". Far worse than his father's anger, however, is when he "gets the soft eyes". "... it's like he's not really looking at anything. It's like he's looking at something inside of himself, or something from the past. It's hard to explain ... It scares me, and I'm not sure why."

An unknown dread permeates the story.

Two of his father's fingers, lost in a farming accident we are told, are mounted on the mantle in the lounge room. "They're so awful looking, but you can't look away from them.

Things are like that sometimes. You can't look away, even when you want to."

The boy is homeschooled. His reference books are a set of encyclopaedias, a dictionary and an old copy of *The Australian Women's Weekly*. He assumes his mother looks like Elizabeth Taylor. He wonders if other grown men – his father's face is the only one he knows – look like Larry Hagman.

Our narrator is unreliable because he is unformed. "There's a lot I don't know," he writes after thinking he might have seen one of The Others close to the farm. "I know more and less than I've ever known, all at once."

Is this a climate change or Covid-19 dystopia? Jacob tells us, because his father has told him, that there is no electricity, no water and no police. His father, who makes him check his body for lumps, has "always said there's only one cure for plague".

The comparisons with *The Road* are justified. A scene where the father goes to town, or so he tells his son, and returns with a can of Sirena tuna – a food the boy has not seen before – is a wonderful nod to the can of Coke moment in McCarthy's novel. The other novel that comes to mind is Emma Donoghue's *Room*, about a kidnapped, imprisoned mother and her young son. Like Jack in the room, Jacob on the farm knows only what he sees.

Telling a story from a child's perspective is difficult, but Brandi pulls it off beautifully. When Jacob sneaks beyond the perimeter of the farm one night, we see a scared 11-year-old who has read a little about the solar system. "I came to a fork, a path left and right – both was into darkness. No stick. I looked to the stars again. A thousand years ago they would already know, already know about this place. About the farm and the hill. About us."

With no human contact beyond his father, he bonds with animals. When he puts a frog on top of an ant nest "as an experiment", his response once the ants do what ants do is sadly personal. "The frog's mouth was opening and closing, like it was telling them to stop, or asking me for help, or maybe just asking why I did it." Soon after he remembers his father telling him: "Sometimes, you have to do the most terrible things."

We guess at the depth of those terrible things and who will do them. The father, the boy, The Others? Is this a story of protective paternal love or of paternal love gone wrong? His father says, "... sometimes how it helps

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to have a good imagination, but I'm not sure that's always true".

The Others is Brandi's third novel. *Wimmera* (2017), which received the Debut Dagger award from the British Crime Writers' Association, is set in a remote Victorian town and features a teenager who, like the author, is of Italian descent. *The Rip* (2019) is set in Melbourne and the main characters are homeless people addicted to drugs.

Wimmera and *The Rip* are page-turners, even though Brandi is not afraid to take his time. He draws the characters fully and whether we like them or not we are invested in their lives and need to know their fate. He is comfortable leaving open the sort of questions that are usually answered in crime novels.

Brandi flies a bit under the radar. That should change with *The Others*, his boldest book to date. This deeply unsettling novel is not *The Road* or *Room*, but it deserves a place beside them. ● Stephen Romei