

Paul D. Carter, *Eleven Seasons* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

Here it comes. He's on his own, in space, ten metres from his opponent. He takes a bounce and roosts the ball into the vacant goal square. As it tumbles between the goalposts and over the railing on the other side he feels relieved, complete. It's the kick he spent all night thinking about. He's just as good in a real game as he is at recess, maybe stronger: inside the boundary line, the game is the only thing he has to think about. (20)

In the dingy suburban Melbourne flat he shares with his mother, Jason Dalton spreads out his collection of Hawthorn football cards in a row on his bed, and he dreams.

Football is his passion, and his gift. Life only makes sense to Jason when he's out on the oval, Sherrin in hand; he has trouble focusing in school, and is intrigued by girls but doesn't know how to communicate with them. Most bewildering and hurtful to Jason is his mother's response to his love of football; she says that she wants to watch him play, but each Saturday morning he searches in vain for her face in the crowd. He knows how tired she is; he understands that she has to work long and irregular hours to support them both – his father is not in the picture – but he can't understand her seeming refusal to recognise or share in the thing that matters most to him. As he transforms from child to adolescent, Jason's hurt at his mother's attitude deepens into resentment, and meanwhile the other areas of his life are beginning to fray. The tragedy is that Jason thinks that he's doing OK for himself, but in reality he is emotionally immature, unable to comprehend or identify with the people in his ordinary life, and off the football field the only way he knows to respond is with anger and violence. Then his mother reveals a shocking truth to him that shatters his perception of the world of football for ever.

This concludes Part One of the novel, which follows Jason progressively through his teenage years. Part Two picks up the story two years later, during which Jason has been away both physically and emotionally; now he returns to Melbourne, to confront his old life in the hope of making a new one. The second half of Jason's narrative is much less clearly delineated than the first; it struggles for momentum at times, in a reflection of Jason himself as he tries to carve out a fresh existence while still grappling with the shadows of his past.

There's much to praise about Paul D. Carter's debut novel, which won the Vogel this year. Carter handles Jason's character compellingly against the nostalgic backdrop of 1980s Melbourne; his portrait of flawed manhood is sympathetic and heartfelt. Through Jason's experience, Carter dissects the Australian sporting dream aspired to by so many; he illustrates the darker side of football with episodes that reveal the underlying misogyny, brutality and violence. And yet, conversely, Carter demonstrates a real passion and nostalgia for the great Australian game of football. The messages conveyed in this novel are positive ones, and leave us feeling hopeful for Jason's future. Carter's writing style is reminiscent of Winton: clear, unadorned prose that is nevertheless rich in sentiment and pathos.

The only aspect of the novel I find problematic is the handling of the character of Jason's mother, Christine. Because she reveals so little of herself, even to her son, she comes across at times as detached and uncompromising, and correspondingly not always sympathetic or even likeable. As he grows up, Jason gleans small fragments of his mother's past life – mainly from rare, poignant moments of confidence between mother and son, when Christine lets her guard down enough to relate an old story or memory – but he cannot associate the bright and blithe girl of these anecdotes with his careworn mother, clad in faded

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jeans. In the second half of the book, she exists almost on the periphery, increasingly distanced from Jason as well as from the reader. While I understand the limitations of the narrative perspective – the story is, after all, told from Jason’s point of view – I found this to be an unsatisfying treatment of such a strong female individual, and felt that there was scope for further exploration of her character.

Ultimately, *Eleven Seasons* is a powerful coming-of-age tale, with a strong and convincing voice. It is also an authentic representation of masculinity as it is translated through the medium of Australian Rules football. The most significant testament to Carter’s talent and vision, however, is that he has addressed his subject matter in a way that will resonate with both men and women, football fans and football philistines – and with kids like Jason too.

Kate Hayford