

The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea

First published by Penguin, 1965.

In 1941, Rob Coram is six. The war feels far removed from his world of aunts and cousins and the beautiful, dry landscape of Geraldton in Western Australia. But when his favourite, older cousin, Rick, leaves to join the army, the war takes a step closer.

When Rick returns from the war several years later, he has changed and Rob feels betrayed. The old merry-go-round that represents Rob's dream of utopia (the security of his family and of the land that is his home) begins to disintegrate before his eyes.

The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea allows us a precious glimpse into a simpler kind of childhood that no longer exists.



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Abridged Review by Lisa Hill.

For a copy of the full review visit this site:

<http://anzlitlovers.com/2011/01/31/merry-go-round-in-the-sea-by-randolph-stow/>

The writing is memorably vivid: scents, flowers, prickles underfoot all seem so real, and the WA heat shimmers across the paddocks to bring the sense of place authentically alive.

This authentic voice of childhood is matched by nostalgic descriptions of a time and place long gone, and Stow's story is an elegy for the kind of childhood freedom that speaks strongly to people of my generation. We were so lucky to be allowed to range far and wide without much parental interference! For Rob and his little friends, school closed if it was too hot, and the teachers took those who couldn't go home to the pool. They were free to climb trees from which one might fall; free to dangle precariously from playground equipment and free to experience that frisson of danger as they hurtled around in space.

The symbol of the merry-go-round is more, however, than just a symbol of childhood fun. Like the quotation in Rob's autograph book from John Donne's *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*,

"Thy firmness makes my circle just/ And makes me end where I begun".

Where the point of the compass remains fixed while the pencil draws a circle, the merry-go-round represents the way Rick's family is thought to stay still and unchanging while the world seems to move around it.

“The merry-go-round of life revolved. In Asia there was war, and in Geraldton the profoundest peace”. (p352)

Rob, we know, will outgrow the merry-go-round to which he is so attached, but the unchanging peace of home that soldiers yearned for is not the same, and neither are they.

Nearly all of the story is written from Rob's point-of-view and so it is a shock to the reader when without warning the text segues to show what is happening to Rick. The first is where they have been captured and the Japanese have committed an atrocity. It is their first intimation of how unpredictable and dangerous the Japanese are. The second scene is years into their captivity, one mate has just met his death and another is dying. A third scene is near the war's end. The effect of this is that like Rob Coram, for at least half of the story the reader doesn't know whether Rick has survived or not either. This sense of not-knowing is very powerful.

The narrative drive is strong, and the dramatic tension that accompanies the final chapters makes the book hard to put down.