



The Cartographer

Peter Twohig

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Melbourne, 1959. An 11-year-old boy witnesses a murder as he spies through the window of a strange house. God, whom he no longer counts as a friend, obviously has a pretty screwed-up sense of humour: just one year before, the boy had looked on helplessly as his twin brother, Tom, suffered a violent death.

Now, having been seen by the angry murderer, he is a kid on the run. With only a shady grandfather, a professional standover man and an incongruous local couple as adult mentors, he takes refuge in the dark drains and grimy tunnels beneath the city, transforming himself into a series of superheroes and creating a rather unreliable map to plot out places where he is unlikely to cross paths with the bogeyman.

The Cartographer Details

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From Reader Review The Cartographer for online ebook

Ruth Gilbert says

I totally loved this book. So cleverly written, so much of its time and setting. Poignant, funny, exciting. Brilliant.

Sue says

This rollicking boys-own adventure set in 1950s' Melbourne is recounted by the Cartographer himself, a working-class boy with no name but many identities. Took me a little while to get into the story but, once there, I was engrossed. The adult world seen from a child's perspective is not a new idea, but this is a resoundingly authentic and endearing version with a great deal to make the reader reflect on. I loved it!

Kiwiflora says

Life looks different through the eyes of a child than it does for us adults! Grown-up challenges, disappointments, responsibilities gradually dilute that magic view of our childhood lives and the things that were so important to us at the time. Isn't it strange how the street you grew up in looks so much smaller and narrower when you revisit it years later. Just imagine how much stranger it would be if you found the map of your neighbourhood that you so scrupulously and carefully crafted when you were eleven, showing above ground and below ground, and looked at it with your now adult eyes!

Not that this happens in this novel, but I imagine our young hero treasuring for a very long time, the intricate and detailed map that he put together over a few months when he was eleven, struggling to find himself, dealing with the sudden and tragic death of his twin brother, Tom, a year earlier, and his parents' collapsing marriage.

It is Melbourne, 1959. Our nameless hero, simply Tom's twin, is a sad, lonely, confused and unhappy little boy. But he is also stoic, highly imaginative, very observant, independent, insanely curious and thanks to his special survival bag very self-sufficient. His exploring starts when his father finally leaves the family home, giving our hero his mission of finding out exactly where he has gone to live. His curiosity leads him up and down alley ways and path ways, front yards and back yards, and an absolute magnet for any curious, adventurous child - a ladder leaning against a house. Up he scoots and promptly witnesses a murder. Now a man on the run, he spends large chunks of the unfolding story avoiding the murderer, and various other miscreants/crooks/scary people he encounters along the way. His flight path(s) eventually takes him into the drainage system of the suburb of Richmond, which he explores very methodically, opening up a whole new world. So what does one do with all this knowledge - he maps it! Hence the name he gives himself 'The Cartographer' along with 'The Outlaw', 'The Railwayman', in addition to his all-round superhero capabilities. There are references galore to the fictional heroes of the time - the Phantom, Wonder Woman, Mandrake, Biggles, Kim from Rudyard Kipling, the Wizard of Oz. An extra ordinary child really!

And so over the course of his adventures and exploits, our young hero gradually comes to terms with the death of his brother, his family situation, and develops stronger bonds with the 'good' grown ups in his life -

his grandfather, the Sandersons who live nearby, and one or two others. Narrated in the first person, he is a fabulous little guy, trying to make sense of all that is going on around him, trusting his instincts in these new situations he finds himself in and the variety of people he is meeting.

It is not a perfectly well told story however. I did lose track a bit of who some of the characters were, their relationships with other characters, and what they were sort of all there for! I thought maybe this might be a reflection of the unbelievable activity going on in the boy's brain, but thinking again, if he is so meticulous in his map making skills, then he would be just as diligent in keeping track of those he meets and how they inter relate with each other. But he doesn't. As a result the book is too long, and there are probably a few too many deviations from the main thread. But it is still a most entertaining read, with a most lovable young lad at its centre.

Cel Jel says

This book is set around the streets of Richmond in the early part of the twentieth century. Richmond, Victoria, Australia. It includes a murder or two, and may be therefore thought of as a mystery, but it also includes lots of detail of the sorts of businesses that may have been seen. I found it interesting, and have yet to get to research some of the areas shown in it.

Julie Twohig says

Loved this debut novel by Peter Twohig. A rivetting and moving story. Looking forward to reading the sequel, just published: The Torch.

Vicki says

Whoa, that was a wild ride. I'm exhausted from reading this book. I thought I was going to get bored with the exploring but it all wound together nicely as the story progressed.

Alison O'Keefe says

Not anything at all like what I was expecting. Really enjoyed the voice of this story - I never felt that it wavered, it was consistent the whole way through which is very impressive. This may however have contributed to my one problem which was that it was a little long and seemed to have too much happening. I liked the tie-ins at the end, but we seemed to have one too many things happen before getting there. I enjoyed the story itself. Every character was put together so well, and the voice of the narrator was a great mix of fun and funny - with just the right amount of sadness.
Highly recommended!

Keen says

Set in Melbourne, in the inner suburb of Richmond in the year 1959, Twohig creates an uncomfortable but alluring world of uncertainty and intrigue surrounding a young boy coming to terms with loss, striving for meaning and redemption in this curious and colourful coming of age story. In one sense this is a love letter to the area he grew up in, tapping into a rich world of excitement and adventure of childhood and in another it celebrates all the joys and horror of growing up. Like all good childhood portrayals there is darkness and delight in equal measure, as our main character tries to navigate and make sense of his neighbourhood and his life, in light of the recent death of his twin brother and a series of gristly events that are taking place around him.

KateFromAllGoodBookStore says

fantastic! a unique narrative voice - great for book clubs and anyone who liked Jasper Jones. Set in Melbourne 1959, The Cartographer (our main characters superhero name - I don't think we ever learn his real name come to think of it) has "become the boy to knew too much"...part Ginger Meggs, part boy-reporter and part comic book hero.

Lindz says

Literature is filled with children trying to understand the complicated world around them. 'Oliver Twist', Scout Finch in 'To Kill a Mocking Bird', Holden Caulfield in 'Catcher in the Rye'. All have a distinctive voice that will carry you through the novel. 'The Cartographer' follows in that grand tradition. Does it succeed, hmmmmmm not quite, but bloody close, and bloody good for a debut novel.

We meet our young adventurer in Melbourne late 1950's, nearly a year after his twin brother's funeral. His voice is strong and distinctive, very dry, that classic Australian rye humour. I love how he would use classic aussisms, but without really knowing where they came from, a mimicry of the adult world that surrounds him.

This is a world where everyone is an Aunt, and every open door is an opportunity for cake, cream biscuits and lemonade. But our lost hero delves deeper into Richmond's underbelly, mapping everything he finds out. This is where the novel falls short a little for me. It is filled with bumbling murderers, friendly neighbourhood gangsters, and stereotypical corrupt coppers.

But in saying this, 'The Cartographer' is paying homage to that pulp noir 1950's, and Twohig does manage to capture an emotional truth within its pages, even if all the loose ends do become a little confused at the end.

But even then the great Raymond Chandler could not account for all the bodies that turn up in his pages. So yeah to new Australian fiction!!!

Vivienne says

Loved it! Like sitting at your grandfather's feet listening to stories.

Hayley says

The Cartographer is a very looooong book and in lesser hands I would have struggled to go the distance. But what really got me through was the lead character, known only as 'The Cartographer' (and various other superhero identities) who is just so extraordinary that he makes every part of the book fascinating.

Set in 1950s Melbourne (which alone is a great place to be) we are dragged kicking and screaming into adventures that most people only dream of (or fear) as the eleven year old Cartographer sets out to map his neighbourhood, driven by the recent loss of his twin brother. The Cartographer is reminiscent in voice to 'Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close' as the young character tries to make sense of the world around him after the loss of a loved one.

The plot is primarily character driven by The Cartographer, resulting in a shambolic style that only loosely follows the traditional narrative structure, but being so compelling a boy I was quite happy to trust that he'd lead me into high adventure and unexpected situations.

The ending sadly left me wanting. I merrily read along expecting some kind of resolution to all the mysteries we encountered but instead it ends with the character making peace with his situation in so subtle a manner that it wasn't until a couple of days later that I realised this had been the true purpose of the story. The loose ends the author did attempt to tie up were confusing at best, although I appreciate that we are only seeing through the eyes of a child with his limited understanding of the grown up world.

I loved the character much more than I loved the book, which is an odd feeling. But in itself, the book is hilarious, poignant and devastating - all the things a good book should be.

Clive Parkin says

This could so easily have been four stars. At times, stunning moments of description, action, ingenuity and pathos. Only to be undermined by wayyyy too much writing. I recalled the bit from the movie "Amadeus" where there is the accusation of a piece having too many notes - here is is too many words. Chop out 30-40 % and this would be a cracker.

Book Bazaar says

A wonderful new voice in Australian fiction. This book evokes the streets of Melbourne beautifully and takes us into the world of kids running free all day during the holidays, a time long disappeared for most of us. We meet great characters in The Cartographer and it will strike a chord with people who remember the

heady days, full of possibility, when you were finishing primary school.

Kelly Callaghan says

I am not at all sure how I feel about this book. It has some great aspects and some not so good. So..... middle of the range for me.

We are told that this tale takes place in the late 1950s, a year after Tom's death in a playground accident. Tom is the protagonist 's twin brother who is called at various times The Cartographer, the Outlaw and Railwayman. After witnessing a murder The Cartographer decides to map his neighbourhood experiences so he can avoid returning to the negative ones. He is particularly adept at exploring underground tunnels.

The Cartographer has a marvellous way of speaking and explaining what he sees - a lovely voice, although there are a lot of Australianisms that international readers may not get - talking about meat pies he refers to them as Four'N Twenty (the brand name).

Some reviews have mentioned that the story rambles in the middle and this is somewhat true. Several of The Cartographer 's adventures read like episodes in a TV series and it is only towards the end of the book that these episodes link into the main narrative. The 1950's, from this reading, were both a tougher and more gentle time, particularly if you live in one of Melbourne 's poorer areas.
