

# Ted Dawe's *Into the River*: A compelling portrait of life for a working-class teenager in New Zealand

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On October 14, following widespread public outrage, New Zealand's Film and Literature Board of Review decided to lift an interim ban imposed the month before on Ted Dawe's novel *Into the River*. The board rejected a complaint by fundamentalist Christian group Family First, which wanted to prevent under-18-year-olds from reading the novel (see: "Outrage over banning of New Zealand novel *Into the River*").

Much of the corporate media supported Family First, attacking *Into the River*'s depiction of sex, drug use and coarse language. After the novel won the national Children's Book Awards in 2013, a *New Zealand Herald* editorial denounced it as a "crude depiction ... of New Zealand" with "obscenities and shock references that worthwhile literature does not need."

These attacks by the self- and state-appointed guardians of public morality are entirely to Dawe's credit. His book is far less sexually explicit than many widely available novels. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the attempt to suppress *Into the River* has been motivated by anxiety over its realistic portrayal of contemporary New Zealand society.

The story of Te Arepa Santos, a working-class boy of Maori and Spanish descent, who is bullied and traumatised at an elite Auckland boarding school, has resonated with many thousands of young readers.

This is because Dawe writes with rare honesty and frankness, coupled with a definite feel for how teenagers speak and act. His characters express widely held sentiments of bitterness, alienation and anger towards the social set-up, which find no reflection in the vast majority of films, TV shows and books. The novel punctures the nationalist myth, peddled by the media and political establishment, that New Zealand is an essentially egalitarian country, free from racism and massive social inequality.

In his submission to the Board of Review, Dawe explained that he set out to "write the most complete account of a young man growing up in New Zealand that has ever been attempted ... Tell a powerful story. Tell it TRUE. Gloss over nothing. Leave nothing out."

*Into the River* is one part of this ambitious project, covering two pivotal years of Te Arepa's life, from age 13 to 14. It is a prequel to Dawe's first novel *Thunder Road*, published in 2003, where Te Arepa appears as a 19-year-old. A third novel, *Into the World*, dealing with Devon (Te Arepa's adopted anglicised name) aged around 15 to 18, has been completed but has not yet found a publisher.

At the beginning of *Into the River*, Te Arepa and his younger sister live in the village of Whareiti, on the impoverished East Coast, with their grandfather Ra. Their mother is in hospital with tuberculosis, an illness produced by poverty, and their father is in prison ("It was difficult for Te Arepa to even mention his father, so steeped was he in shame"). Neither parent plays any active role in the novel.

Despite his deprived childhood, Te Arepa is adventurous, creative and

fascinated by history. He spends the early chapters hunting a giant eel with his more timid friend Wiremu, and listening to Ra's stories about their tribe's past. He particularly identifies with his Spanish ancestor Diego Santos, a fearless pirate who escaped to New Zealand and fought for Te Arepa's tribe in the nineteenth century inter-tribal wars.

Noticing the young teenager's talent for poetry, a teacher suggests that he apply for a scholarship to Barwell's College, a fictional boarding school in Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city. It is after Te Arepa's arrival at Barwell's that the novel becomes more powerful and menacing.

Te Arepa excels academically, becoming absorbed in Latin and ancient Roman history: "The Punic wars totally consumed him. They made sense of things. It was as though he had been waiting for this all his life." He sympathises with the Carthaginians, the brave "underdogs" defeated by Rome, seeing their tragic fate as analogous to that of the Maori tribes conquered by Britain.

Frighteningly quickly, however, Barwell's College begins to change Te Arepa. His openness and love of learning are knocked out of him by the school's harsh and corrupt social hierarchy, which is clearly a metaphor for New Zealand society as a whole.

Barwell's is steeped in pretentious and reactionary traditions, preserved since the British Empire: hypocritical religiosity, glorification of rugby, a hierarchical "house" system, and systematic bullying. The younger students, especially those from poor families, suffer relentless and degrading abuse by their seniors, which is tacitly condoned by the faculty.

Barwell's appears to be partly modelled on the prestigious Auckland Grammar School, which is sited near the Mount Eden Prison. In the novel, Te Arepa's friends compare their school with the local gaol.

As the only Maori student, the older boys address Te Arepa as "Maori," and sometimes "Nigger." In a futile attempt to stop these racist insults, and to fit in with the majority, he changes his name to Devon.

When he visits Whareiti in the holidays, Te Arepa/Devon feels ashamed for playing down his heritage. He quarrels with his grandfather, saying: "Maori things are sneered at ... [it] puts me in the losers' camp. I'm there with the chinks, the Indians, the nerds, the fags." He returns to school feeling "tainted by guilt and failure."

The novel portrays racism as part of broader class oppression. In a Reddit forum, Dawe explained, "I hoped that this book would shine a light on some of the social inequalities that we have come to accept as normal. The subject is broader than just Maori. It is the way a large proportion of people live their lives."

In a horrifying early episode in his new school, Te Arepa/Devon watches his friend Mitch, a promising athlete from a working class family, get beaten almost to death by a gang of seniors, as punishment for standing up to them. Devon hates himself for being powerless to intervene and the reader shares his indignation when he learns that appealing to the

teachers will only make things worse for the boy.

Devon rapidly descends into a state of ongoing anguish and confusion. He behaves thoughtlessly and impulsively, seeking ways to escape the misery of school life, including frantic, inept and emotionally empty sex with a girl from his village and two young female students from a nearby school.

The only time he feels “confident and in charge” is when he is out on the open road, driving. Having been taught by his cousin Paikea, a courier van driver between the East Coast and Auckland, he consciously seeks to emulate her confident and efficient technique, which he admires immensely.

Mitch, whose father has been in and out of jail, introduces Devon to Auckland’s illegal drag racing scene. Devon is attracted to the chaos and apparent lawlessness of this world, and the freedom he feels behind the wheel, as opposed to the oppressive atmosphere of Barwell’s.

In response to claims from the media and Family First that the novel’s depiction of underage sex and drug use is unrealistic and harmful to young readers, Dawe has insisted it is based on his experiences working as a teacher for more than 35 years. He told Fairfax Media: “To look at my book and [say] it’s damaging to the youth of this country shows a gross ignorance of how things are these days.”

In a speech published in October 2014, in the journal *English in Aotearoa*, Dawe explained: “One of the spurs behind this book was to expose what happens at boarding schools. What happens when the lights go out. The issue was first revealed to me by a student I taught ... who had been moved to my school from a boarding school. He was the most damaged kid I have come across ... he really was. He was a broken kid—I would be very surprised if he is still alive today.” It appears that this student was one of the inspirations for Devon.

Helped by his “brainy” friend Stephen, the son of a diplomat, Devon enters the most advanced class, which the headmaster describes as “the stream that produces the leaders. The movers and shakers. The people you read about in the paper.” Devon is told, “You owe it to your people and to the school [to succeed].” He instinctively rebels against the headmaster’s patronising attitude and at joining this elite layer.

Stephen, nicknamed Steph “because he was a bit girly,” is one of the novel’s best drawn characters. Though the same age as Devon, he has “the wit and confidence of someone seventeen or more.” Many prior experiences in different private schools have made him profoundly cynical, with a nasty streak.

Steph introduces Devon to drugs, and bends the school rules by manipulating an emotionally volatile senior and his choir teacher, who are both sexually infatuated with him. “We can do what we like,” Steph tells Devon, “We have what they want ... we can give them some of it ... and then take what we want.” Steph’s schemes ultimately backfire, however, and the circumstances of his expulsion from Barwell’s leave him further damaged.

Even more than the bullying, Devon is disgusted by the hypocrisy of the school’s administration. When Steph’s plan to wreak revenge on his friends’ chief bully unravels, with tragic consequences, the headmaster’s sole concern is to preserve Barwell’s reputation. Devon refuses to inform on his friend, rejecting the two-faced appeals from his teachers, who tell him “the truth will set you free” and “life’s not complicated; it’s just a series of choices between right and wrong.” He is promptly scapegoated and expelled for bringing “drugs and perversion” into the school.

While Devon rejects the elite world of Barwell’s, he has no positive alternative. Unwilling to return to Whareiti to face his grandfather’s disappointment and a life of “suffocating monotony,” he chooses the illusory “freedom” of life on the streets of Auckland.

In *Thunder Road*, set five years later, Devon has become a charismatic, nihilistic street racer and drug dealer. The relatively naive narrator, Trace, befriends him and is led into the city’s criminal underworld. The story

careens towards an inevitable, violent conclusion.

“Devon had this idea,” Trace explains, “It goes like this. Young guys like me and him, we’re held back. First by our parents, then by schools, and finally, when we leave home, the rest of the world makes it clear early on that we are crap ... If you roll over and take it, then you’re dead already. The brainwashing has worked. The rules are made up by the winners, just to keep them on top. You have to bend the rules, otherwise it’s just a lifetime of kissing arse.”

These rebellious sentiments are no doubt widely shared. Dawe writes for two generations of youth who have grown up in New Zealand through three decades of soaring social inequality, and increasing militarism.

Hundreds of thousands of young people during that time have been affected by the destruction of jobs, rising student debt, homelessness, and endless cuts to welfare and other social services. One quarter of New Zealand children grow up in poverty, while the rich profit from financial speculation and other parasitic activities.

Successive governments have joined the criminal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while whipping up nationalism and xenophobia at home. There is profound hostility to the Labour and National Parties, and their various allies, reflected in the record low voter turnout in the last two elections. Capitalist politicians, not unlike Barwell’s College administrators, are seen as hypocrites and liars, who routinely violate democratic rights and use brutal force to maintain the status quo.

*Into the River* is not without its faults. The characterisation of the school bullies is somewhat one-sided and limited. The semi-mystical aura surrounding Te Arepa’s childhood in Whareiti, which separates the latter from Devon’s life and circumstances at Barwell’s College, seems overly contrived.

More importantly, the narrative sometimes moves too quickly from one episode to the next, revealing too little of Devon’s reactions and thought processes. The speed of the deterioration of his relationships with his grandfather, his sister and his friend Wiremu, is unconvincing. And Devon’s reaction to his cousin Paikea’s death towards the end of the book is surprisingly muted.

The truncated feel of some of the chapters may well be the result of the book’s editing. Dawe’s initial 500-page manuscript was rejected by the publishers, who told him it was too long for teenage readers. He heavily revised it, cutting more than 200 pages.

The publishing industry’s aversion to lengthy fiction aimed at teens is both patronising and a major miscalculation. When young people feel stimulated by a novel and can relate to the experiences, reactions and emotions of its characters, they read voraciously. Any number of teen series—the Harry Potter novels, above all—attest powerfully to this fact. It would be good to be able to read a more complete version of Dawe’s original *Into the River*.

These matters aside, the novel as it stands tells a powerful and vital story, free from simplistic moralising and unafraid to say what is. The book constitutes a powerful protest against the wilful destruction of promising young lives by a toxic and decaying social system.

In his submission to the Board of Review, Dawe wrote: “We need a new literature for a new age. As we blunder into the new millennium we need a literature that is prepared to roll its sleeves up, to get dirty, to be fierce but compassionate, to say the unsayable.” These are admirable artistic goals. One hopes the next instalment of Devon’s story will be published soon.



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