



Author Interview—MICHAEL THOMAS



What aspects of your own life and family have entered or inspired the characters and happenings in *The Map of William*?

I was born in Carnarvon and spent my formative years in the town. My father was a shearer and my mother, a housemaid. As a young man I have travelled extensively throughout the Gascoyne and Pilbara regions of Western Australia working as a roustabout and drover. My family history is deeply embedded in the land where William walked and it seemed natural to set my first novel in this magnificent part of Australia. Alexander Thomas, my great-great grandfather lies buried in a bush grave near Nullagine and my great grandfather, also Alexander was laid to rest at Roebourne Cemetery.

I stepped into the great unknown when I commenced writing *The Map of William*. As a first-time author the challenge was to reimagine the lives of those who had gone before – the Thomas men and women who lived and died and now lie buried – from Nullagine to Flanders fields and beyond. Some were murderers and highwaymen – others were butchers or soldiers, wives and mothers. There is a little of all of them in my characters in *The Map of William* – the best and worst of us.

The story explores themes of family, self-discovery, and resilience. Why was it important to you to explore these themes?

I've always been fascinated by the idea of family and the relationship of that idea to the reality. I was always struck by how large nuclear families were back in the day. At the time of her death in 1910 my great-great grandmother, Louisa Thomas was farewelled by more than 100 living descendants – her family and her legacy. Every waking hour would have likely been devoted to the care of her husband and children, with little time to pursue her own interests. I'd like to think that my great-great grandmother was a member of a guild or had joined a local knitting circle – for some 'me time' more than anything.

William shares a bed with his younger brothers – one brother farts quietly and often – the other has night-time troubles and 'has promised to stop drinking if that would help.' There is no greater test of resilience than to endure such a fate and it is fair to say that every

journey of self-discovery begins at home. **The Map of William** draws inspiration from family past and present, with some of my own experiences nestled somewhere in the pages.

Your novel is set in WA, 1909. How did you go about capturing this time and place?

How does a 65 year man find the voice of a 15-old boy in a place and time so different to the world we live in? It would have been easier to use a current day vernacular and tell William's story in a more contemporary style but I felt it important to remain true, or thereabouts, to the language of the day. It was a matter of finding a style that I was comfortable with and to that end I read hundreds of letters, documents and newspapers produced in the early 1900s in search of William's voice.

The Map of William was as much a journey for me as it was for my characters. Always a history buff I should have known to look no further than my own backyard for my first novel and eventually settled on 1909 for reasons that I can't quite put my finger on. As a boy I had travelled the vastness of the northwest of Australia and had a degree of familiarity with the landscape. I also made a deliberate decision to 'borrow' from the lives of the Thomas men and women who preceded me and to incorporate their remarkable stories in a novel.

At the heart of this book is a father and son's relationship – what do you hope readers will take away from this?

It was always my intention to explore the relationship between William and his father, but also William and his mother. 'I love them both in equal measure,' William tells the reader at the beginning of the novel. Some time later he informs his father – 'I have learned everything from my father. He loves my mother and that is all I need to know.' Father and son are on a journey in search of water but it is the 'finding' of each other that really embodies the heart of the novel. Towards the end of the book, William says, 'It was a simple realisation. Hywel Watson had come to trade his life and in that moment no boy on earth could have loved a father as fiercely as I loved mine.'

Self-awareness is a lifelong journey, and difficult to achieve for most of us. In William's case he has managed to acquire a degree of humility and wisdom at the ripe old age of 15. This is due in no small part to the influence of both his parents and the unconditional love that is openly expressed towards each of their children. In the case of William and his father, there is great affection and honesty between them – a loving respect that eventually becomes a remarkable friendship. The novel also explores the bonds of mateship that magically form between men, and the blurring of the lines between love and mateship – weighty themes I know, but that was my intention.

How did you develop William's character and how he changes over the course of the novel?

I set myself the onerous task of writing a novel in the first person, told from the point of view of an unworldly 15 year-old boy. It seemed like a good idea at the time. There are certain limitations and restrictions inherent with first-person narrative, but there is also a tremendous freedom I found. As an author you are afforded the luxury of living inside the head of your character – to walk in their shoes and to share their thoughts and experiences.

William begins his journey as a relatively naïve teenage boy. His voice is breaking and there is a degree of self-conscious quietness about him. He is like any young man finding

his feet in the world of men and **The Map of William** intentionally examines the subtle transition from boyhood to manhood and the influence that good men can have on a teenage boy struggling to find his own identity. William is mentored by any number of extraordinary people and the old adage that it takes a village to raise a child is also explored in the book.

Which writers or books do you greatly admire?

I grew up on a diet of Charles Dickens and Agatha Christie. I remember my father presenting me with a modest collection of Agatha Christie novels and the feeling I had as I unwrapped the package and inhaled the pages. I admire authors who use uncomplicated language to tell stories that resonate, and have always enjoyed Ernest Hemingway for that reason, among others. It would be fair to say that I have an eclectic appreciation of literature – from the classics to the undoubted brilliance of Hilary Mantel and a raft of Australian authors too numerous to mention. I remember reading *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* as a school text and was surprised to learn that the author, Randolph Stow was from my part of the world. It was that incidental revelation that inspired my own desire to write – better late than never.

What themes or messages did you want to convey through your novel?

Sadly, **The Map of William** is a sage reminder that history repeats itself. I have attempted to align the novel with recorded historical events and to present an accurate account of what is known and recorded. It was always my intention to confront our history and avoid the trap of rewriting it. The narrative treads lightly, and deliberately so, but there is a clear moral imperative at the heart of the book. William is witness to the historical events of his day, albeit in a contrived work of fiction and told from a certain point of view. The lives of so many Thomas men and women are inexorably bound to the indigenous history of Western Australia, my own included, and to bypass the truth was never a consideration.

Every mother would love to have a son like William. Every father could look to Hywel Watson to see what it takes to be a good one. All of us could look to a man like Rover to understand the power of forgiveness. When the final word has been read and **The Map of William** finds a place on a dusty shelf, what remains? In the end the reader decides and the author is grateful that someone took the time to read the final page.