

Rhubarb

Craig Silvey

About the author

Craig Silvey was born in 1982 and grew up on an orchard in the south of Western Australia. Aged eight, Craig Silvey entered the literary scene with his moving and seminal text 'Tonsawha?', a semi-autobiographical tale detailing one child's brave struggle against the rigours of tonsillitis.

At fourteen, he resolved to be a writer after a school presentation involving Glyn Parry, who is Craig's acquaintance to this day.

"He (Glyn) spoke with such passion about writing. I was immediately hooked," recalls Craig.

This prompted him, rightly or wrongly, to embark on a truly horrendous manuscript involving a remote prison and a drug conspiracy.

Despite this first attempt, he didn't give up.

"I alarmed my parents early, at 17 years of age, that I wasn't going to apply to university. I told them I was to move away in the pursuit of becoming a writer."

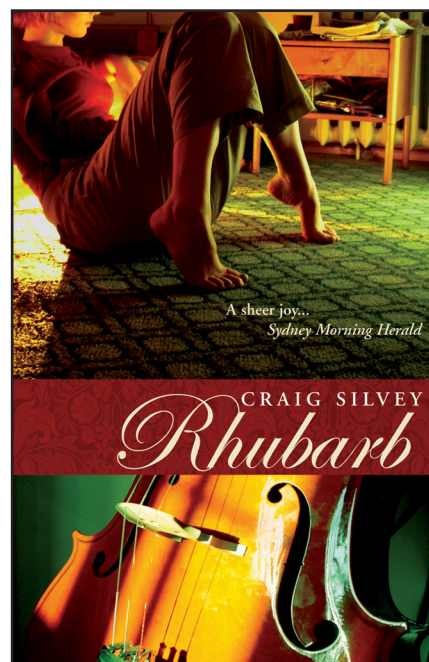
Following his education at a private Anglican school, he moved to Fremantle. He had begun making notes toward *Rhubarb* when he was 16, and then spent the better part of three years scribbling in a darkened room, completing the novel before he turned twenty.

First published in 2004, *Rhubarb* won him a Best Young Australian Novelist Award by the Sydney Morning Herald in 2005. It was also shortlisted for The Australian/Vogel award in 2001.

About the novel

Rhubarb was the first novel from a young writer with an astonishing talent. With his sublime and playful use of language and his uncanny ability to reveal the human condition in all its vulnerability and fragility, Craig Silvey created an extraordinary contemporary Australian story.

It is a poignant and tender sort-of-love story about two damaged people tenuously connecting. Eleanor is blind and lives with her reclusive mother. Ewan is a cello player with agoraphobia. She is drawn to him through his music but cannot understand the difficulty he faces in forming a friendship. He does not understand her past nor the impact his music has on her. Amidst the



heat of a Fremantle summer they stumble towards each other.

Sad, funny and affecting, and peopled with characters that live and breathe, Rhubarb is simply a wonderful novel.

Discussion questions

1. What is the importance of the link between the Beatles' song Eleanor Rigby and the character of the same name?
2. Discuss the rhubarb motif, and how it links the characters.
3. How authentic are the characters? What qualities and aspects of the writing contribute towards your experience of 'knowing' the characters?
4. Both Eleanor and Ewan suffer from different disabilities; blindness and agoraphobia. How does this limit the characters? What is Silvey saying about the marginalisation of dysfunctional individuals in the community?
5. How do their maladies affect their relationship to each other? How does it affect their ways of seeing the world?
6. What is the importance of Ewan's cello-playing to the story's development? What is the significance of the hybrid instrument that Ewan creates in his backyard?
7. Craig Silvey says, "some readers have said Rhubarb is a love-story, and a book about coping, but I think it's more about how we don't cope." Discuss.
8. Craig Silvey writes from the perspective of many different characters - including those from the animal world. How effective is his use of the hermit crab and Warren, the guide-dog? How do their ways of seeing relate to the way Silvey's human characters see the world?
9. How does the characters' sense of place inform the story? Much of the story focusses on the streetscapes of Fremantle. Could the story be set elsewhere?
10. Silvey has been compared to the early work of Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* and Gustave Flaubert's *Novembre*. Discuss.