



The Rules of Backyard Cricket

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It starts in a suburban backyard with Darren Keefe and his older brother, sons of a fierce and gutsy single mother. The endless glow of summer, the bottomless fury of contest. All the love and hatred in two small bodies poured into the rules of a made-up game.

Darren has two big talents: cricket and trouble. No surprise that he becomes an Australian sporting star of the bad-boy variety—one of those men who's always got away with things and just keeps getting.

Until the day we meet him, middle aged, in the boot of a car. Gagged, cable-tied, a bullet in his knee. Everything pointing towards a shallow grave.

The Rules of Backyard Cricket Details

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Author : Jock Serong

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Marianne says

“I no longer know where this ritual came from: the bat, the tennis ball, the twelve metres of shorn grass. There’s a line somewhere in any childhood. Before the line, all knowledge and habit is contributed by adults. How to eat with a fork, wash your face, wipe your bum. On the other side of the line, the magpie child starts to gather and collect from everywhere. How to swear. How to kiss a girl. Where you go to die. Backyard cricket must have been absorbed on the parental side of that line”

The Rules of Backyard Cricket is the second novel by Australian author, editor, surfer and former lawyer, Jock Serong. Darren Keefe lies in the boot of a car speeding along the Geelong road towards Melbourne, bound at the wrists and ankles with cable ties, a bullet wound to the knee, sharing the space with a shovel and bags of quicklime. To pass the time as he heads towards his (almost certain and very probably violent) death, he recalls the events of his life that have led to his current, unenviable situation.

“It’s pointless, this. Clinging to memories. Rewinding them, replaying them. But it’s compulsive: I feel them rushing forward to be counted, the people and occurrences whose very existence depends on me recalling them”. Darren’s thoughts turn to where it all began: endless summers in their Altona backyard, bowling to his brother, Wally, older by almost two years, on their carefully mown cricket pitch, with their single mother, Pamela, supporting their every foray into the cricket world.

Darren’s unique perspective on his life (that of someone likely to soon die) ensures honesty, self depreciation and quite a bit of black humour. He acknowledges the differences between the brothers: “It’s the Big Guy who sets us on the paths of our typecasting. Wally as responsible, grave: a leader. Me as a force of nature: a talented freak with no mooring” and “One columnist says he’d pay to watch Darren Keefe because something amazing might happen, but he’d bet the house on Wally Keefe, because the necessary will happen”.

Serong begins each chapter with Darren’s efforts to unbind himself, to effect an escape. As Darren reflects on their lives, their careers successes and failures, plenty of topical issues affecting professional sports are examined from an intimate perspective: corruption and match fixing, the prevalence of drug taking, sledging, Australia’s love affair with cricket and the tolerance of unacceptable behaviour in sportsmen. “It’s a euphemism, larrikin, a kind of willing blindness about character flaws”. Serong also touches on some perennial themes: loyalty, sibling rivalry, violence, sacrifice, infidelity and dementia.

While it is not necessary to be an expert about the game or even a fan to enjoy this novel, a rudimentary knowledge of cricket will add to the appreciation of the story. But, as Serong states in his acknowledgements, the story could have been written with any professional sport as background. And the goings-on he describes are all too believable. Serong gives the reader a plot that at first seems predictable, but unexpected revelations will elicit gasps and a few twists will keep the pages turning to the shocking conclusion.

Serong’s descriptive prose is wonderfully evocative: “...a black and silver knot of photographers and equipment completely obscures the entryway from the arrivals hall” and “...I care a great deal about the idea of a father. A dad. So I collect the little clues she leaves. I go through private drawers sometimes, searching for his identity. I build him painstakingly from these twigs and straws, but the shape he takes always feels

hollow" are examples. And another:

"As he waits, he's a helmeted statue, silent and implacable. I've never seen him brush a fly in that state. They could wander over his face, even up his nostrils and he wouldn't know. It seems like languor if you don't know what to look for. But it's the invisible building of energy and focus to a point of detonation, a form of biomechanical perfection only revealed in slow motion"

Fans of Serong's work will not be disappointed; readers new to his work will want to seek out his first novel, *Quota*. This is literary crime at its best. Both funny and tragic, this is a brilliant read.

Angela Savage says

The Rules of Backyard Cricket had me in its grip from the first bounce. No amount of sledging from my opponents (read 'family members demanding my time and attention') could distract me from its thrall. Even for someone as disinterested as me in the actual sport of cricket, this novel is an absolute winner.

The back cover blurb that draws a parallel between The Rules of Backyard Cricket and Peter Temple's best work is no exaggeration. Serong pulls off what I consider an Australian crime writer's most sought-after Quinella (to use a metaphor from another sport): a literary crime novel that qualifies as genuine Australian noir.

Don't miss it.

Text Publishing says

'Readers who have fallen in love with Australian mysteries, thrillers and crime novels have a whole world to discover with fantastic authors bringing the southern hemisphere to life...As in the UK, cricket is a national passion in Australia and Jock Serong delves into the murky world of professional sportsmen in his crime novel, The Rules of Backyard Cricket.'

Jane Harper, Daily Mail

'Merges my childhood dreamscape of hot days and sporting ambition with a page-turning thriller set within the rot of professional sport. Beautifully Melbourne. Get on it!'

Tony Wilson

'Funny, sad and oddly touching...Beautifully written and acutely observed, The Rules of Backyard Cricket is a noir tour de force...Original Australian crime fiction of the first order.'

Sue Turnbull, Sydney Morning Herald

'Serong writes pithy, pin-sharp dialogue...The book is expertly plotted, and its noirish climax with its dark drama and its final twists, is devastating. Get out and buy this book; it is the best new novel I've read this year.'

Crime Time

'A novel of suspense, I heartily recommend it.'

Shots

'The Rules of Backyard Cricket hits all other cricket books I've read to date for six. This tale is not just about cricket, it's about the good, the bad and the ugly and a timely story, too, with sporting integrity often in question.'

Weekly Times

'Serong is an elegant writer who can move effortlessly from laugh out-loud funny to elegiac to downright touching... Those of us who played back garden cricket and remember how seriously it was taken by all concerned will lap up every single run and wicket in this book.'

Crime Review

'The writing is sharp and the flawed characters compelling... Serong bowls with a wry eye.'

Otago Daily Times

'Suffice it to say the back cover blurb that draws a parallel between The Rules of Backyard Cricket and Peter Temple's best work is no exaggeration. Serong pulls off what I consider an Australian crime writer's most sought-after Quinella (to use a metaphor from another sport): a literary crime novel that qualifies as genuine Australian noir.'

Angela Savage

'[A] gripping tale of sibling rivalry as two Aussie brothers battle in cricket and in life.'

Best Books of 2016, New Zealand Listener

'Jock Serong returns with this bitterly, beautifully nostalgic look at a seventies childhood gone awry.'

Best Crime Books of 2016, Readings

'Jock Serong's gripping narrative is a compassionate exploration of masculinity and humanity as he chillingly questions whether we truly know those who are closest to us.'

Good Reading

'The Rules of Backyard Cricket by Jock Serong, while classified as 'crime', is a compelling literary novel dissecting toxic sporting culture and its fallout.'

Paddy O'Reilly, Australian Book Review, 2016 Books of the Year

'The Rules of Backyard Cricket got the thumbs up from everyone.'

Favourite Fiction for 2016, Avenue Bookstore

'Blow me down if I didn't hang on every word.'

Clare Wright, Best Books of 2016, Australian

'One of the great novels written about sport... Delicious. It's the top read of the summer.'

Stuff.co.nz

'The Rules of Backyard Cricket by Jock Serong, while classified as 'crime', is a compelling literary novel dissecting toxic sporting culture and its fallout.'

Paddy O'Reilly, Australian Book Review

'A deeply interesting novel about sibling rivalry, family, masculinity, and the game of cricket... Serong is a talented storyteller, and he brings this unusual world to life.'

Booklist

'My favourite reading experience of the year (and I don't even like cricket).'

Heather Taylor Johnson, Sydney Morning Herald's Year in Reading

Cam says

Shit, that was good. The end

Carolyn says

This is the tale of two brothers, growing up together in Melbourne, playing backyard cricket and going on to International careers in cricket. But they are two very different brothers, Wally serious and conscientious who would go on to be the team captain and Darren the larrikin and party boy who would go on to be the team clown. Unfortunately for Darren, this haphazard life and neglect of the people around him leads to serious consequences and at the opening of the book, he finds himself tied up and knee capped, in the boot of a car presumably on his way to a shallow grave. As he struggles to free himself from his bonds he reflects back on the events that brought him to this point.

Jock Serong has very vividly described the world of competitive team sports. Although this novel is about cricket and growing up to play cricket for Australia, it could be any team sport in any country where sport is king. The world of pressure to perform, constant travelling, family estrangement, fans and glamour, drugs and illegal betting depicted here is much the same as in any high profile sport. It was fascinating to see how the two brothers grew up to play very different roles and reacted to the pressures of the game as they became famous on a world stage.

Karen says

When Jock Serong's debut novel QUOTA was released it was the first crime fiction book I could recall using over-permit limit Abalone catches as a central theme. The incorporation of crime and cricket therefore shouldn't have come as that much of a surprise in his second novel, THE RULES OF BACKYARD CRICKET. If both of these books are anything to go by, this is an author with a keen eye for an unusual but extremely workable scenario.

The depiction of cricket, from the Keefe brother's backyard contests, through to their District, State and ultimately Australian representation is brilliant. The careful use of tactics everywhere, the effects of micro-waving tennis balls for the backyard form, everything about the all consuming nature of the game and its subtleties is gloriously depicted. The way that this sport provides a way forward for the two sons of a fierce single mother, her involvement, her constant presence behind them, and the dawning realisation that Darren comes to, of the sacrifices that their mother must have made, are perfect.

Which does not sit well with the opening of this novel - starting as it does with a trussed up Darren in the boot of a car, at night, being driven somewhere to pay a hefty price for something. As the novel starts to switch backwards and forwards through the boy's childhood, and Darren's current predicament, a picture starts to emerge of two different and yet similar brothers. Darren's always been a bit of a loose canon. A fierce player, erratic and undisciplined, he had potential and yet, ending up in the boot of a car has some sort of inevitability about it. The older brother, Wally, is a quieter, more reflective boy and man. A less flashy cricketer, he's still good enough to follow the same trajectory. Wally's the brother who makes it to Australian Captain. He's got the big house, the travelling lifestyle, the testimonial dinner on retirement. Darren was the one always in trouble for breaking team rules, the one with nothing much to fall back on when injury takes away his big chance at cricketing fame and fortune.

There's a lot about the tensions between the brothers that come from them simply being brothers, and then there's that which comes from the intricacies of the cricket world. The difference between being a respected Test Player, and a bit of a one-trick showman in the shorter forms for example. Then there's the question marks over the game itself rearing their ugly heads as the two men are stepping away from the game.

All the way along there's Darren's voice - looking back at their childhood and the lives that they lived, and at his present - in that boot with its inevitable sense of doom, approached with determination and a calm level-headedness that's somehow apt. Darren might have been a mercurial customer in his youth, but he's no fool, and he's not prepared to lie in that boot and take what's coming to him without an argument.

Really, everything in *THE RULES OF BACKYARD CRICKET* is brilliant. As the novel progresses, slowly and steadily, like a tactical battle against a good opposition test team, Darren works his way through his options, playing the timeframe, working the percentages. He's also calmly analysing what got him into this situation, and, as in any good cricket game, sometimes you can see the moves being played out, and sometimes they come straight out of the back of the bowler's hand.

For a cricket obsessed reader, fond of the assertion that test cricket is a metaphor for life, *THE RULES OF BACKYARD CRICKET* made me wonder about that just for a moment. Darren, Wally and their mum used the game as a way out of a difficult background, something that gave them a chance of a better future. What they got was more like a rain-affected draw, in the final game of a tied five day test series. For this reader though, *THE RULES OF BACKYARD CRICKET* was nearly as good as 5 nil whitewash, home series defeat of the old enemy.

<https://www.austcrimefiction.org/reviews/the-rules-of-backyard-cricket-by-rob-brown>...

Kristina says

This book starts out with our protagonist shot in the knee, tied & bound and locked in the trunk of a moving car and alternates between that and everything in his life that led him up to that point. Cricket plays a major role in this story; I know nothing at all about cricket but it really didn't matter, that wasn't an obstacle to reading and enjoying this book. This was a fairly interesting, well-written, worthwhile read.

Thank you to Netgalley and Text Publishing for an advance copy of this in exchange for an honest review.

Suzie says

4 1/2 stars. Great storytelling with some fabulous nostalgia thrown in.

Paul says

The Rules of Backyard Cricket – Brutal and Brilliant Literary Crime

Jock Serong is the award winning writer of The Rules of Backyard Cricket, which is one of the most brutal and brilliant literary crime novels of the year. Serong clearly is one the boldest new voices in Australian literary circles and The Rules of Backyard Cricket should endear him to a wider audience here in England.

Darren & Wally Keefe are talented cricketers who grew up playing out in the backyard, using anything they could for bat and ball. Whether it was using the fence as the boundary, the lazy pet dog as a fielder and the tree stump as the wicket, this was their world. Where there was a fierce sibling rivalry, even though Darren did look up to his elder brother Wally. Brought up by their single mother who works all the hours God sends to provide for all their needs, and especially for their cricket.

From the outset it is clear, that even though the Keefe boys are talented, Darren and Wally are clearly very different people. Darren had two massive talents, cricket and trouble, both came to him easily, whereas Wally was more studious of the game, always calm under pressure and would not cause trouble, ever.

Darren is the sort of character that has always seem to have got away with whatever trouble he caused, until the time we meet him, when he is middle aged, in the boot of a car, gagged, cable tied and with a bullet in his knee. He knows he is heading for the end, as he begins to reflect on his life and that of his brother.

This literary crime is written in a fine tradition of suspense novels, with brilliant and clear prose which brings to life the gripping narrative. Throughout the novel we observe everything from sibling rivalry, winner takes all, masculinity, the trappings of celebrity and humanity. How even as we approach our last breath we are looking for those few extra moments.

An enjoyable and intriguing read that really draws the reader in, Jock Serong really is a new talent we should all be taking note of.

Louise says

An easy, entertaining read charting the rise and fall of an Australian sporting family tragically torn apart by greed, corruption, betrayal and unimaginable disloyalty.

This is a title for my 'holiday reading' shelf if ever there was one.

Brenda says

3.5★s

Darren Keefe and his older brother Wally had been keen cricketers from a very young age. Hitting the ball backward and forward in their back yard, they learned everything they could while the competition between them was fierce. Their mum was a constant support; a single mother she worked hard to supply them with all they needed to have a happy life growing up.

As the boys grew into men, their propensity for cricket continued. Wally and Darren both ended up in senior teams and while Wally went on to greater heights, Darren became involved in trouble. One of the bad boys of sporting history, Darren got away with a lot. Until the day he didn't...

What would be the result of that bad-boy life? The bound and gagged body in the boot of the car had a story to tell...and what a story it was!

The Rules of Backyard Cricket by Aussie author Jock Serong was a suspenseful mystery with a fair amount of cricket reference. And there lay my trouble – I'm not a fan of cricket at the best of times! The actual mystery was relayed in short bursts – the cricketers' story was much more detailed. But I'm happy to recommend it to mystery fans as I'm sure others will appreciate it more than I did.

With thanks to Text Publishing for this copy to read in exchange for my honest review.

Phrynne says

This was a very interesting one! To start with, the main character is telling the story from the boot of a car where he is bound and gagged and shot through one knee. Not a good way to be.

His story begins in the backyard of his childhood home, playing cricket with his older brother and then carries us forward through the life he was living until just before things turned really bad. Hence the kneecapping and the car boot.

It was all quite fascinating! The author writes beautifully about a childhood growing up in suburban Australia. He also portrays two very different careers in professional cricket masterfully to the point that even I was interested (and I am not a fan).

There were some gruesome bits, some very sad bits and quite a lot about relationships of many types. The ending was a twist that I half saw coming. I am not spoiling anything if I ask - how on earth did he think he would get away with it?

A good book. Read it:)

PattyMacDotComma says

4.5★

“Sport goes to the heart of everything. If you can reach inside it and f*k with its innards, you’re actually messing with society . . . Bigger than drugs. Bigger than hookers and porn, because people shy away, they can smell the desperation. But the same people will go on consuming sport long after they**

know it's rotten to the core. They're insatiable."

It could be any sport, but this is Melbourne and this is cricket. You've probably heard, when someone cheats, "But that's not cricket!" meaning that's not honourable. Cricket is supposed to have high standards. And I'm sure cricket tragic (die-hard fans) like to think it still does.

I enjoyed it in spite of all the cricket. You can skim the hit-by-hit details because Serong is such an accomplished writer and story-teller that anything important to the story is made clear. I've sat through enough televised cricket (while I read) that I have some understanding, but the sports story is universal. The lugging of equipment, the time spent away from home, the patience or otherwise of family and friends. The perks, the downsides.

As kids, Wally and Darren Keefe were typical rough-and-tumble brothers, close in age and passionate about cricket. They spent every waking hour practicing in the backyard until they could try out for the local clubs.

Darren narrates the story, beginning from the boot of a car where he's battered, bound, and gagged, on his way to certain doom. He's obviously crossed somebody big-time.

"To my sad surprise, whether you're crawling home from Christmas with the aunts, or waiting to be shot dead and incinerated by gangsters, the Geelong Road turns out to be just as boring."

While trying to extract himself (shot kneecap and all) from the cable ties and tape, he fills us in, with chapters alternating between the family back story and the current crime victim horror.

He and his brother are like a psychotic Shane Warne split in two – Wally, the dedicated, first-rate professional and Darren, the talented but hard-partying larrikin whose media coverage spills out of the sports pages and into the gossip columns.

"One columnist says he'd pay to watch Darren Keefe because something amazing might happen, but he'd bet the house on Wally Keefe, because the necessary will happen. Journalists love the potential clichés we suggest: Cain and Abel, Jekyll and Hyde, Noel and Liam. They know intuitively that we represent something latent on every suburban lawn where a newspaper lands. We are the inseparable siblings every parent worries for: good boy, bad boy. Total connection and fratricidal rage."

Mum raised them single-handedly and was loyal to a fault. When Darren was in trouble later: **"Mum adores me regardless, loves us both, in fact. She won't hear a bad word—said to Wally after the charges were laid that I'd just fallen in with a bad crowd. Bless her—I was the bad crowd."**

But, she was right, which is how he ended up in the boot of the car. It's often said that Aussies will bet on two flies on a wall, but I suspect that's universal. So that leaves plenty of room for all kinds of funny business. Darren tells us that behind the scenes of broadcasts

"... commentators would routinely check with the players in advance about tactics; that we'd report back to the network with batting orders and bowling changes so they could tailor their advertising to the appearances of the big names."

I enjoyed Serong's writing style, his characters – the good, bad, and ugly – and the family dynamics. He's captured that terrible awkwardness between competitive siblings who drift apart but still have to appear together in public and at family events. And he shows that what happens on the road can certainly come back

to bite you. Of course, fame excuses a lot, and he shows us that too.

I can see this as a mini-series, and I could see it adapted for a number of sports – US baseball, Canadian hockey, soccer/football just about anywhere!

Excellent! And even better if you're a cricket tragic! Thanks to NetGalley and Text Publishing for the review copy from which I've quoted.

Andrea says

You don't have to be a cricket fanatic to read and enjoy this book, but I think it would help to at least understand a bit about the game. Luckily I went through a cricket-mad phase as a kid, and this helped to pull me through the sometimes-dense descriptions of matches, styles and administration that appeared throughout the story.

Wally and Darren Keefe grew up in a single-parent family in the western suburbs of Melbourne. They had a large backyard and an interested and supportive mum, so both went from backyard cricket superstars, to club, then state representation and finally the baggy green. They had the usual incidents of sibling rivalry, but on the whole, the brothers took pleasure in each others' successes. But when Wally was chosen for the national team ahead of Darren - the brother that looked better on paper - their cricketing trajectories began to diverge.

So how did Darren wind up in the boot of a car, cable-tied, and with a bullet-hole in his knee?

A good read, but for me this didn't have the same breathtaking impact as *On the Java Ridge*.

Andy Weston says

I think it is very difficult to write quality sporting fiction and that is evident in that there is so little of it. There have been some outstanding books based around cricket though, *Chinaman*, *Netherlands*, and this year, *Selection Day*. This however, is not one of them.

The book is at its strongest in the first few chapters when the boyhood of Wally and Darren is described. There are several amusing passages and a good insight into the coming of age of two cricket mad boys in the Melbourne suburbs.

Serong has tried to make the story contemporary and included some of the game's big problems in the remainder of the book, match-fixing and addition to drugs. From the moment that the boys graduate to State cricket though the book goes rapidly downhill. Too much is going on too quickly. It is also too far-fetched. Names of other players of the day are occasionally dropped in, but the author has been far too ambitious, when he he the makings of a good story.
