



To Name Those Lost

Rohan Wilson

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Summer 1874, and Launceston teeters on the brink of anarchy. After abandoning his wife and child many years ago, the Black War veteran Thomas Toosey must return to the city to search for William, his now motherless twelve-year-old son. He travels through the island's northern districts during a time of impossible hardship - hardship that has left its mark on him too. Arriving in Launceston, however, Toosey discovers a town in chaos. He is desperate to find his son amid the looting and destruction, but at every turn he is confronted by the Irish transportee Fitheal Flynn and his companion, the hooded man, to whom Toosey owes a debt that he must repay.

To Name Those Lost is the story of a father's journey. Wilson has an eye for the dirt, the hardness, the sheer dog-eat-doggedness of the lives of the poor. Human nature is revealed in all its horror and beauty as Thomas Toosey struggles with the good and the vile in himself and learns what he holds important.

To Name Those Lost Details

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Calzean says

Wow. Rohan Wilson is producing books covering the days of the Wild West of Tasmania as brutal as Cormac McCarthy.

In Wilson's second book, Thomas Toosey has lead a brutal life and cares little about the lives of others; except for the son he has left in Launceston and now journeys to find him to start a new life. But Toosey has robbed an old lag and former mate Fitheal Flynn who is now tracking him with his daughter to revenge his lost. His daughter has been seriously damaged, first by being crushed by a charging cow and then when she is pushed into a fire by Toosey when he enters and robs Flynn's house.

They all meet in Launceston during the riots of 1874 when the locals protested against a levy to pay for the Deloraine railway.

Wilson captures the poverty of the the underprivileged, the harshness of the police and the violence that ruled the life of the poor. I could taste the dirt, blood and grit.

Lisa says

I try not to overdo the superlatives when it comes to discussing books, but Rowan Wilson's new novel To Name Those Lost is magnificent. Somehow he has managed to capture both the brutality and the redemptive promise of early Tasmania in a superb novel that had me captivated from the moment I started reading it.

Thomas Toosey is a veteran of the Black War about which Wilson wrote so evocatively in The Roving Party. He is a hard man, brutalised by years of poverty and violence, his own childhood destroyed by life on the Tasmanian frontier:

His first sight of the island as a child of fourteen sent out for thieving two overcoats in the winter of 1827 was the sandstone buildings studding the hill above the harbour in Hobart town and when they brought him above decks of the Woodford in iron fetters and set him aboard a longboat for the shore he'd thought Hobart a pissing version of his own Blackpool, the inlaying of warehouse masonry much like the stores on Talbot Road, the stark shapes of houses near the same, but then the winter mist parted from the mountain peak above and he knew he was in venerable country, as old as rock, and it wasn't long before he became indentured to the frontiersman John Batman who ran a trade in victualling the army, and here the boy Thomas learned how the island's wilder parts truly belonged to the tribal blacks, a displaced people taking refuge in the hills, and for a government bounty and to secure his land this frontiersman meant to hunt them by whatever means just or unjust, bloody or brave, and he marshalled a party of transportees and black trackers and put into the scrub armed for war and war it was, a bloody war, in which all hands were soiled and Thomas's no less than another's for a killer now he was, an easy killer, and yet while he was diminished by it, made less in God's eyes and his own, he saw in the bullet, the knife, and the club a power that could make a man his own master. (p. 55)

(You can see in this excerpt Wilson's masterful use of prose which conveys a sense of the 19th century and

its rugged idiom without overdoing it).

The use of that power lands Toosey a 10-year sentence in Port Arthur, further hardening his heart. But this brute receives a pitiful message from his son, twelve years old, and motherless now.

Bronwyn McLoughlin says

Two men with revenge in their hearts; two children, dearly loved and damaged. This is a grim tale, visceral and unlovely. Ultimately it is a story of two men with criminal pasts, the love they have for their children, and their determination to protect and rescue them from the morass in which they are engulfed. Set in Colonial Tasmania, where ex-convicts seem to constitute the majority of the population, and life is desperate, for orphaned children and working men alike. Thomas Toosey and Fitheal Flynn know well the dark side of life, and are desperate enough to want to save their children from the direness of their environment - and in so doing set themselves against each other. At counterpoint to the squalor and immorality are the parading, moralistic Rechabites complaining about the avarice of the governing bodies. And over this tapestry is a life and death struggle to survive. Tremendously evocative of the savageness of just existing in a remote outpost, where law and order are barely maintained. Strong overtones of a western novel; sweaty, smoky and dirty with hints of eucalyptus. Truly a page turner and well worth a read.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘Her head hit the floorboards, bounced, and a fog of ash billowed, thrown so by the motion of her spade.’

It is 1874. Tasmania is in transition from its penal origins: transportation ceased in 1853. But while the ruling classes are focussed on the structure and law of their society and increasing their wealth, there are a significant number of people struggling for their existence. Many are former convicts. In early 1874, pandemonium broke out in Launceston. The government had imposed a levy on those living near the Deloraine-Launceston railway line after the collapse of the company that built it. Those who riot cause damage, but cannot prevail against the large and well-armed police force.

‘The rioting was confined to the rabble and larrikin classes, scarcely any ratepayer taking part.’ (The Mercury, 9 February 1874)

This is the background to the events in Rohan Wilson’s novel. William Toosey is 12 years old when his mother dies suddenly. He writes to his father Thomas, asking for help. Thomas Toosey (who appeared as a boy in Rohan Wilson’s first novel ‘The Roving Party’) is a grey-haired labourer who has spent 10 years in the Port Arthur Penitentiary, convicted of a dreadful crime. He has stolen £200 in banknotes from Fitheal Flynn, with whom he was in prison, and his three daughters. In short, although Toosey sets off for Launceston to find his son, he appears to be beyond redemption. Flynn, accompanied by one of his daughters, disguised as a male and covered by a hood, sets off after Toosey. Sure, he wants his money back but there’s more to the story than that. Flynn and Toosey are both fathers seeking to make amends for their actions in the past by making provision for their children. Toosey is desperate to find William, and acutely aware of the dangers that befall orphans in the streets. Flynn is keen to track down Toosey: he wants his own retribution.

Rohan Wilson brings the Launceston of the 1870s to life: from Cimitiere Street through the City Park to Princes Square, along Brisbane Street and Charles Street, across Windmill Hill and then later back through the town and across the river into the slums of Invermay. The place and street names remain, and much of the landscape is recognisable today. It's a dark, bleak story brilliantly told, set in a dark time in Launceston's colonial history.

'History is the art by which we live our lives, he said. You have your history and I have mine.'

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Trish says

Australian novelist Rohan Wilson came roaring out of the starting block with his first novel, *The Roving Party*, published in 2011 in Australia, and in 2014 by Soho Press for the U.S. market. That first novel described the hunt for aborigines still residing in Tasmania, Australia's southernmost island state. In the 19th Century, white European settlers began to capture and eliminate to extinction the native black aborigines in Tasmania, calling this period The Black War. *The Roving Party* reimagines this period using real historical figures and accounts. The book was shortlisted or won several national and regional awards.

The main character in Wilson's second novel, Thomas Toosey, was once a member of one of those roving bands, though what he learned in service was that blacks were residents there first, and that a knife is a powerful inducement. Toosey remembers his own family with longing, even though his wife sold his alcoholic self down the river for a few quid more than ten years previously. Living rough in Deloraine after leaving the convict town of Port Arthur, he learns via desperate letter from his son William that his wife has died.

The journey to Launceston and the search for his son, who has been living on the street since the death of his mother, reads like a fever dream: very visual, very sweaty, very terrifying. We are aghast to find Toosey has stolen banknotes from his friend Flynn, and caused a terrible accident to befall Flynn's daughter. Toosey had been looking for enough cash to start a new life away from Tasmania with his son.

Wilson's special skill is making history come alive; he sets his personal drama within the context of an 1874 railroad protest in Launceston. He makes it epic: characters struggle with life or death, right or wrong, him or me, now or never, as though they ever had any agency and they were not just playthings for the gods. There are so many watchers and witnesses in this novel, they take on the character of a chorus in a Greek tragedy or a Shakespearean meme, able to shift the action minutely. Street urchins, hobos and tramps, hotel workers, cops—many folks are watching this personal struggle play out: Thomas Toosey seeking son William, trailed by revenge-seeking Flynn, in the middle of a city gone berserk.

The opening lines of this novel are visual enough to describe a film, or a manga comic.

"Her head hit the floorboard, bounced, and a fog of ash billowed, thrown so by the motion of her spade."

This is William's mother falling down near-dead from a standing position while sweeping the grate. Her son, William, races in shortly after with a growler of stolen brewery beer to give her, only to discover he needs a doctor instead. Racing away to find a doctor, William is waylaid by a cop who wants to put the twelve-year-

old away for the brewery theft.

Right here, right at the start of this novel, we can feel the tension Wilson sets up for us between a grisly realism and an absurd, immovable, buffoonish cop whose comic deafness derails the child's plans and kills the mother. The rest of the book follows from this cruel dichotomy: absurd life, spectacular death, and the struggle between them. It almost seems if anyone stopped to think for just a second about what they were struggling for, the fight would go out of them, a legitimate philosophical stance and an accurate way to observe the human condition.

"History is the art by which we lead our lives."

Once again Wilson has taken a historical moment in Tasmania, looked deeply into its components, and the whole thing bursts into life—into flame, as it were. We reimagine convict life in Port Arthur, the muddy streets of Deloraine, the bustle and insincerity of worldly Launceston...and real moral conundrum. Wilson has one of the 'orphans' stand in the shadows, observing the action, knowing more about motivations and outcomes than the combatants engaged in life or death struggle. That orphan can change everything. Will she?

"There is as much ruin comes from love as virtue...Do not follow that fool into his hole. He wanted more for you. You need to want more for yourself."

Wilson won another award for this novel, the 2015 Victoria Premier's Literary Award for Fiction. Definitely worthy of attention, his work is big: it encompasses large, important themes, and at the same time, is completely unique.

Rob says

I've spent a number of years immersed in the details of Tasmanian history. This novel gathered together historical elements and brought them all vividly to life. The characters are engaging in their often desperate journeys and the account of Launceston engulfed in rioting provides a vivid backdrop. This is a great read for anyone interested in historical drama and the anarchic and often disparate elements of colonial life.

Deb says

If you thought life was tough in 'The Roving Party', you'll be more or less prepared for a more urban-based bleakness here. Or maybe not. Less lyrical moments without the sense of wild landscape of the earlier book, compensated by some interludes that almost evoke magic realism but which are quickly beaten into submission as action resumes. A brute of a book in many senses -- but I couldn't put it down (a one-night read) and my head was in its spaces for days afterwards.

Jesse Coulter says

When an author has as stunning a debut as Rohan Wilson did with "The Roving Party", there's always the fear that the follow-up will disappoint. Did every idea he had go into his first effort? How will he do under

the pressure of a deadline? Was it simply a fluke? Never have I seen such fears as comprehensively dispelled as with “To Name Those Lost”.

Not only has Wilson maintained and improved upon the sparse, unforgiving brutality of the prose in his previous work, he has stepped up his pacing, characterisation and general versatility. In choosing essentially the same setting and time period for his second novel as he did with the first, Wilson ran the risk of the idea seeming dry or re-hashed; it doesn’t at all.

This novel has the same brooding, serious quality as the “The Roving Party”, but is organised in such a way as to be a genuine page-turner, a rare quality for books of this type. It’s grim, depressing stuff, but infused with a kind of beauty and vitality that stops it being too dense. In fact it possesses quite a few of the qualities that made fellow Tasmanian Richard Flanagan’s “The Narrow Road To The Deep North” so extraordinary. I can only hope Wilson begins to receive some measure of the same kind of praise, as is very much deserved.

“In time Jane dreamt of the cold dead in the earth far removed, and far above, among the mounds, hearts that beat hot like coals in a burning hearth and when the fire dies the ash collects, always more dust than ember, more death than life, for that is the way. And the chiefly gift of parent to child is this, to bed down the land with their ash and make a place where fire will breathe and be warm, and the debt is told in beads of white smoke, the furrowing heat. And the sound of love is to name those lost who lived for others.”

Poppy Gee says

I was anticipating this novel after I enjoyed Rohan Wilson's debut novel The Roving Party so much, and it was worth the wait. This new novel could be Tasmania's answer to the American tradition of Westerns. Set in the 1870s, in Tasmania, there is a cat-and-mouse chase for stolen money, blurred lines in the battle of good v evil, and with wealthy residents in grand homes and hotels while impoverished urchins and vagrants search for food and huddle beneath bridges, Launceston seems like the last frontier of civilisation. It's fast-paced action is not for the faint hearted- and I loved it as much as I did his first book. I especially recommend it to anyone who has lived in or visited Tasmania - so great to read a book set in my home state.

Ian Reid says

A sequel to Wilson's previous novel about colonial Tasmania, this story bristles with menace and suspense. The squalid, brutish world of Launceston and surrounding district in the 1870s is convincingly evoked. Occasional stylistic flaws distracted me but I found the main characters authentic and memorable, with moving glimpses of their half-suppressed emotional neediness.

Dlmrose says

Laura says

Wilson's writing is like moonlight on a sharp blade, his story a wine barreled for so many years that when it is brought forth it is thick on the tongue. Wilson truly "names those lost", gives them voice and breath so real we can smell the sweat of their desperation.

The toughest most powerful book I've read since David Vann's Goat Mountain or Courtney Collins' The Untold.

Bindybaby says

Wow. It's hard to talk about this book without spoiling the surprises, but I'll try. Thomas Toosey is searching for his son who is a street kid in Launceston in 1874. His wife has died and left William alone. But that's only half the story. Thomas is also being pursued by Flynn, an Irish ex-convict who is seeking his revenge for a wrong that Toosey has committed in the recent past.

The basic setup becomes more and more complicated as things go wrong and Toosey becomes more desperate. I found myself both liking Toosey and feeling a bit horrified at what he is capable of. He is mean, but you can understand why.

At several points I got shivers up my spine. There is a depth of emotion here that is almost unbearable at times. Toosey's love for his son rings so true and honest that you feel his pain. When the time comes for things to be settled up, and justice to be handed out, you almost have to look away.

Anyway, go read it. You won't be sorry.

Meryll Levine Page says

You may have to be Aussie--or even better Tassie--to read this. I liked the idea but the dialect from late 19th century Tasmania that was used by the former convicts is tough to decode. Once past the language barrier, there's a strong story of relationships and of social class even in the backwater of Launceston.

Erica Johns Cassidy says

From a review I posted on The Reading Room:

I loved this book from reading the preview by Allen & Unwin on Facebook, and was grateful to win the competition to review the book.

The first chapter made me NEED to know what happened to William, and his father. I was also enamoured

with the writing of Wilson and had a deep desire to consume more.

The book did not disappoint. Wilson has a true gift for writing. I first thought to myself it was like reading poetry, but more than that, it was like watching an opera... the story itself wasn't overly exciting, but Wilson's flair for language is truly magical.

You can read other reviews to discover what the story is about, but I recommend not reading too much about the novel, just read it and see if you too can't help but fall in love with this novel because of the evocative use of language - the best I have read for some time.
