

Shane Weaver. *Blacktown*. Random House, 2003.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

Recorded 21 November 2003

To introduce Shane Weaver's autobiography *Blacktown*, I have decided to read a paragraph more or less at random:

If Federation and Gothic architecture had banged and had a baby, it would have been the Robin Hood Hotel. It squatted like it was about to take a dump in the main street over the road from the Blacktown Railway Station. It was a brick-red gargoyle on steroids, smack-bang in the dead heart of town. The stench of stale beer and the cloying disinfectant stink of industrial cleaners combined to set off the gag reflex from 100 yards away. In this regard, the Hood was probably the most honest establishment in Blacktown.

Now, if this is the sort of prose you admire, you'll love this book. Weaver keeps his metaphors as vulgar as possible most of the time, while throwing in the odd cultural allusion to make sure we don't forget he's had an education – at a university.

Weaver and his siblings had a rough childhood in the classic way – poverty, brutalisation, and regular beatings and humiliations from their stepfather. His mother was an angelic victim. For some reason which is not satisfactorily explained, she stayed with this hellish boyfriend who beat her and her sons with monotonous regularity and sexually abused his own daughter. She even married him after many years. It didn't seem to occur to her to try to leave until Shane, her eldest, was big enough to thump him back. I know these situations are often complicated: perhaps this one was too, but if so, Weaver has not given us any clues. It is distressingly easy to conclude that his mother was a classic masochistic victim with little regard for the welfare of her six children.

The Shane Weaver story unwinds, for all its breast-beating, boastful bravado, in a very familiar way. Abused child grows up to be a dysfunctional prize-fighter, abuses drugs, drink, his family and himself, finds god and a purpose in life, finds the Love of a Good Woman, has 3 wonderful daughters (pity about the 5 kids from the previous relationship) and finally makes good. He constantly reassures us that he has outstanding writing skills – “deft of pen

and quick with the apt word” is one of his modest formulations. Therefore the purpose in life which has saved him is to be the world’s best Direct Mail Copywriter. Well, what a distinction! What a boon to mankind!

I can understand that writing this kind of book might play a part in the therapeutic process for someone who has psychological problems of addiction, violence and low self-esteem. It is the classic confessional. Unfortunately, I don’t entirely agree with Weaver’s assessment of his writing skills. His style is florid and attempts to be hard-boiled in the Raymond Chandler manner, but there is no wit or wryness, just heavy-handed sarcasm and tons of preaching – dressed up as philosophising. The glare of his hindsight is sometimes blinding: “I had arrived. I was one of the boys. A party to the piss-ups, gang bangs and dope deals. ... And I was about as happy as a puppy in the RSPCA. ... It was all so shallow.”

The descriptions of violence are sickeningly explicit but soon become ineffective. So, too, the obscene language. But the ‘sensitive tough guy with the heart of gold’ act wears thin very quickly. Weaver is trying his best to have it both ways, writing a titillating book for educated readers who like ‘a bit of rough’, and a drunken prize-fighter’s memoir for those with an interest in alcohol and pugilism. And he has probably succeeded. Despite my distaste for this kind of overwritten sensationalism, nothing will prevent this book from becoming a bestseller.