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The Underdog

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Marcus Zusak is best known in Britain for **The Book Thief**, his highly successful later novel. This book, the first of a trilogy about Cameron Wolfe, a deeply self-deprecating teenager growing up in a contemporary Australian city, is his first published work, and admirers of **The Book Thief** may find themselves looking for signs of what is to come from Zusak, or pondering how much of this story is autobiographical, rather than enjoying the book for its own sake.

Cameron is struggling incoherently to understand what's going on with his family and himself. You might say he is looking for an identity or what it means to be an adult, although these are outsider assessments. He is just keen to stop being useless and to date his first girl: a real girl rather than the masturbatory fantasies in the lingerie catalogue. The incoherence of his attempt to make his mark on the world is apparent in the two great exploits planned by himself and his elder brother, Ruben. The first is to rob the local dentist (it doesn't happen). The second is to steal a road sign (it happens, but they feel so guilty they put it back). But Cameron describes all this completely coherently, in his own voice, including his revelatory dreams, which usually serve to confirm his perceived uselessness. Cameron's moping misery feels authentic, as does the world he lives in, and his occasional, largely harmless, wild behaviour (although the death of a neighbour's dog may be indirectly his responsibility). His resilience, too; for he recognises that, as well as being useless, he is a fighter. And all this begins to come together for him at the end of the novel when he comes to the existential realisation, in a long howl at the moon, that life lived intensely (however it comes at him) and his particular skill at recording that experience is what defines him: 'All that I cared about was that I was howling so that I could hear my voice so that I would remember that the boy had intensity and something to offer.' My problem with the novel was identifying its register. There is much that is comic, but so securely are you in Cameron's self-flagellating mind, with only the merest ironic distance, that, for me, at least, there's little temptation to laugh, even when Jesus appears in a dream complaining about his sandals and the stinginess of 'me old man'. Cameron's journey to selfhood and his first real girlfriend continues in two more short novels: **Fighting Ruben Wolfe** and **Getting the Girl**.

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