



# Little Exiles

*Robert Dinsdale*

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## **Little Exiles** Robert Dinsdale

Jon Heather, proud to be nearly nine, keeps a vigil at the end of his lane. Determined not to be beaten by the cold he stands and waits for his Father. It is Christmas Eve, 1948. Christmas, a time of family and a time of miracles. Although he has never once seen his Father, Jon knows that he is coming home.

But Jon's Father does not return, and one evening no longer able to cope, his mother leaves him by the door above which the legend reads, Chapeltown Boys Home of the Children's Crusade. Several weeks later, still believing his mother will return for him, Jon finds himself on a boat set for Australia. Promised paradise and a new, better life, Jon soon realises the reality is very, very, different.

Epic in scope, LITTLE EXILES is the incredibly moving and heartbreaking story of one boy's struggle to get home. Rooted in historical fact - based on the forced child migration between Britain and Australia that took place after WWII - this novel shines a light on the appalling human cost of the Children's Crusade.

## **Little Exiles Details**

Date : Published February 1st 2013 by HarperCollins Australia (first published January 1st 2013)

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Author : Robert Dinsdale

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# From Reader Review Little Exiles for online ebook

## Jane says

I wanted to give up on this book several times for the first hundred pages or so but am really glad I didn't. I found it very hard to get into and stay engaged but I'm glad I persevered as I learnt about a period of Australian/English history that I knew very little about. What suffering those poor little children went through being sent to the other side of the world as orphans and at the hands and whims of 'fathers'. Not a pleasant book by any means, I was forced to skip a few pages where the killing of a goat was graphically detailed. Too much information for me! Worth a read and hard to put down by the end.

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## Cleo Bannister says

The Little Exiles chiefly tells Jon Heather's story of how he was sent to the Chapeltown Boys' Home when his mother's health declines. Jon is convinced through the early weeks that his mother will come for him but it is not to be and instead he finds himself on a boat to Australia. Not long ago he had been an eight year old boy waiting for his father to return home from World War II, now he has lost his mother, his twin elder sisters and gained a group of boys, both friendly and unfriendly, for a long voyage.

Jon's story has a real ring of authenticity about it; we all now know that historically many children's homes were not caring places. Cut adrift from all they have known Jon and his two closest friends, Peter and George, have to find their own way to survive. Ways to cope with the men in black who they know are child snatchers who don't need to wait until darkness to come. There are many characters in this book which covers more than fifteen years of Jon's life.

Although this book is well told as well being a worthy story to tell it didn't grip me. It is a long book, 426 pages, and I didn't take to Jon's character. I think this was probably intentional, after all a boy separated from all he knows by thousands of miles is not going to be unscathed, but in all honesty I found the middle section a bit of a slog. I did however enjoy the last section, where the lessons the boys learnt early in life become crystallised.

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## Jo says

Little Exiles is a beautifully book that has an underlying thread of sadness that makes it a compelling read. Leeds in 1948 Jon Heathers father has not returned at the end of world war two, and Jon's mother is unable to cope with the pressures of life and leaves Jon at the Chapeltown Boy's Home of the Children's Crusade with the promise to return for him in two months time. But as time passes there is no word from his mother and Jon is forced to go to leave England as part of the forced child migration to Australia.

Jon's relationships with his friends and their shared dream of returning to England and the families they left behind, this is a book for all ages.

The motto of this book is that home is where you find it, not necessarily where you want it be.

This is definitely a five star read.

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## N says

The story starts out well (horrible subject obviously) and it's very easy to get lost into the story until the shoehorned Aboriginal bit (also horrible subject). After that the narrative gets too jumbled and jumps to much to keep a hold of it, the time pacing feels off like the Author only had a few chapters to go from boy to Man and he rushed it to finish the story. By the end I wasn't interested with the ending - disappointed.

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## Heather Hyde says

I didn't know what rating between 3.5 and 4 to give this book, I didn't really like or engage with Jon Heather, but that is the point. Well done Mr Dinsdale for depicting one of the main characters as a strange disengaged boy with an unstable mind and an overwhelming and all consuming desire to return to England after he has spent years in a children's mission in Australia a victim of the cruel practice of shipping children out there when parents became ill or could no longer cope. They suffered such hardships and depravation and were devoid of such human emotions we so take for granted, just for having a normal upbringing. A return is not always the joyous encounter that has been dreamt of or hoped for either!

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## Aditi says

*"Everyone must come out of his Exile in his own way."*

---Martin Buber, *an Austrian-born Jewish philosopher*

Robert Dinsdale, one of my favorite English authors, has woven a spectacular tale about illegal immigration of little children to Australia with or without the consent of their guardians, in his book, *Little Exiles* .

### Synopsis:

*In Leeds in the year of 1948, a eight year old's father doesn't return home, weeks later, that same boy is sent off to Chapeltown Boy's Home of the Children's Crusade by his mother and all the while the boy believed that it's just a short matter of time until he return backs to his own home with his mother and his twin elder sisters. But fate had stored something else for him. Two months later, that same boy along with his few friends that he managed to make in his two-months stay at the Children's Crusade, are also on the same ship which is destined to reach the land of red-earth- Australia. Thus begins the story/journey of the little boy named Jon Heather, who happened to be forcefully sent off to an exile in an unknown land. He along with his friends, George and Pete, they fall, survive, and learn to accept their new lives in Australia. Read it to have a first-hand experience of a true, raw and very Kiwi tale which is packed with only adventures.*

The author has researched extensively to pen down his tale and after reading this story, I can only say that he has done full justice to this deeply moving and very provoking tale. The author has investigated the whole illegal and forceful adoption of aboriginal kids brought in from the United Kingdom's to Australia. And narrating the story from the eyes of these little kids will only fill your heart with anger and sympathy. These kids are made to believe that their parents are dead and hence they are sent off to Australia for a better future, whereas they are sent off to a boy's hostel where they are taught to be a farmer and sometimes are forcefully adopted into some Australian families. Jon Heather is a fictional character but he sounds very much like some kid's painful life-story. This fictional Jon Heather is the epitome of many real Jon Heathers who are

estranged from their family and are never ever found by their parents.

The narration is perfect and very smooth, and from the very first page, I felt myself losing away into the core of the tale. The author has unfolded the whole journey of Jon and his friend's step-by-step and it mainly focuses on Jon's life, how a trauma can kill the whole opportunity for him to grow up as a man. It certainly left him with feeling of longing in his heart. The best vibe that I got from the book is that no matter what Jon never lost hope even for once to re-unite with his family. The characters apart from Jon can only make you love them more, especially Georgie Boy, the bed-wetter- his whole innocence about being naive to the whole situation of exile is quite heart-touching. Pete is another character to fall for, who is elder most in his group and he is the ultimate decision-maker. I'd like to hats off to the author for giving life to the story of a boy and his lost childhood with such brilliance. The plot is also packed with full of crazy adventures and some action scenes that will only make your adrenaline to rush.

**Verdict:** *A compelling and enlightening book that will only touch your very soul and will make you see some hard-core truth behind those illegal immigration of little children and they are stripped away from their childhood.*

**Courtesy:** *Many many thanks to the author, Robert Dinsdale, for giving me the opportunity to read and review his incredible novel.*

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### **Stephen says**

Novel based on the historic movement of child in post war Britain to Australia where there was abuse and this novel is about jon heather and when he moves to Australia from the childrens home in chapeltown area of Leeds. this charts his journey. enjoyed this novel

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### **Nigel says**

I loved this book. Deeply compelling and at times quite hard to read it is the story of children sent to Australia for a "better life". Often told they are orphans and housed in poor accommodation the life they have to endure at times cannot be described as "good" by any stretch of the imagination. Focussing on three boys who are friends on the journey out it is fascinating to see the differing approaches to surviving the situation they find themselves in.

Where do you belong when you feel you don't belong anywhere - highly recommended.

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### **Suzy says**

I liked the idea for this book more than the execution. Based on real stories /research my heart goes out to the vulnerable young boys who were told their parents were dead and then shipped from the UK to Australia, where they endured hardships from the system and the environment. However I found the pace of the novel too slow and the characters to be less well developed than I would have liked. I wasn't gripped to find out what happened to Jon, George and Peter and struggled to keep motivated to read to the end. There are some nice touches, such as revealing the history of the main 'man in black' who becomes the main nemesis of the

children. Overall okay but not wow for me.

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## **Jo Barton says**

Leeds, Christmas 1948, and nine year old Jon Heather anxiously awaits his father's return from the war, but times are hard for the Heather family, and even though Jon's mother tries to hold her family together, she is in desperate circumstances. When she leaves Jon at the Chapeltown Boy's Home of the Children's Crusade, she promises to return for him in two months time, but as weeks pass with no news of his mother, Jon like all the other abandoned boys at the Children's crusade must watch and wait and hope for a better future. What then follows, is a harrowing story of the forced migration of orphan and abandoned children, who were sent from England to Australia, ostensibly to a land filled with promise and great opportunity.

Based on fact, this fictional story is graphic in its depiction of what happened to the children once they reached Australia, and although at times it makes for uncomfortable reading, there is an overwhelming urge to continue with the story, in the hope that life will get better for them in this land of plenty. Jon is a spirited and reliable narrator, and throughout his story, I was reminded of Victorian Gothic novels, where orphans were exploited and used abominably, and then I had to forcibly remind myself that this story was far from Gothic, and had only happened within the last sixty or so years.

Beautifully written, the author Robert Dinsdale has a real flair for storytelling and despite the burden of sadness which pervades in Little Exiles, there is also a story of friendship, loyalty and the eventual realisation that home is wherever you can find it.

I am sure that this book will be featured on many a book group's to be read list. Within it there is much to discuss, and more importantly, so much that remains with you long after the book is finished.

5 \*\*\*\*\*

My thanks to Newbooks for a review copy of this book.

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## **Jodie "Bookish" Cook says**

Book review

Title: Little Exiles

Author: Robert Dinsdale

Genre :Family/Mystery/Drama

Rating:\*\*\*

Review: After World War II, around 3,300 children, most of them aged between three and 14, were shipped to Australia; some 1,000 more were forcibly dispatched to Rhodesia, New Zealand and Canada. Many were sent to start grim new lives on the other side of the world without their parents' knowledge, let alone their

permission. These statistics come from the Child Migrants Trust, a charity that is still helping to reunite divided families.

And this is the world in which Robert Dinsdale roots his superb novel about Jon Heather and a frightened group of other boys from a cold children's home in Leeds who, longing for news of their mothers, are packed into tiny cabins on a ship for six weeks and told to be grateful for their new start with The Children's Crusade.

Australia is not, however, the land of milk and honey that they have been promised. The new home in the outback is hard, ruled by Men in Black, and particularly the cruel figure of Judah Reed who forces bed-wetters to dig the stinking latrines.

Jon Heather, forced to slaughter goats in the baking sun, betray his friends, and fear the 'honoured guests' who come to take boys out for days of lemonade and steaks, is never more frightened than when he realises that his new home has no fences. Is there, he wonders, no other, better, world beyond?

Little Exiles is an emotionally intuitive and moving story about a young boy who refuses to abandon his determination to return home and reclaim his past and his lost family.

Jon Heather is nine when his mother, unable to cope after her husband fails to return home from the Second World War, entrusts Jon to the care of the Chapeltown Boys' Home of the Children's Crusade.

He expects her to return for him in two months, but several weeks later, he finds himself on a ship bound for Australia, ostensibly so that he and his companions will be given the chance of a better life in the colonies.

The harsh reality of life on this isolated children's mission in the Australian bush is reflected in the hard work, strict discipline and stark conditions endured by the boys and girls who reside there.

The physical and sexual exploitation of many of these "inmates" is only hinted at in this compelling novel.

Jon and his younger companion, George, find themselves relying on the protection of the older and worldlier Peter when they embark from the boys' home in Leeds on their voyage to Australia.

As the boys grow up and try to come to terms with their circumstances, their choices are not always understandable or predictable.

However, Jon is the one who is unwavering in his resolve to return to England and find his family. Will his quest be fulfilled and, if so, what will he be able to salvage of his lost past?

This fictionalised account of the forced migration of thousands of British children, is, at times, gruelling and poignant storytelling and is not for the faint hearted.

Convict transportation to Australia had ceased by the 1860s, but for the next century Britain sanctioned the exportation of another kind of human cargo across the seas: unwanted or disadvantaged children, ostensibly to give them better opportunities or turn them into farmers for the Empire. Only recently have the experiences of these child exiles and their families become more widely known and public apologies for the scheme issued by the nations concerned.

This novel takes up the chain and tells the story of Jon Heather from Leeds who, aged nine in 1949, is separated from his mother and sisters by The Children's Crusade and sent to a remote desert mission in Western Australia, run by the sinister "men in black." Most of the children are told that their parents are dead, even when this was often not the case.

This is a disturbing tale that is not just about control and child abuse but also about loss of identity and a search for belonging, and the main drive of the plot is Jon's determination to find his way back home to England.

The illumination of the victims' side of this story is graphic and uncompromising, including a pivotal sub-plot involving the similar abduction of Aboriginal children, but the narrative lacks clarity in places, and despite all that he endures, Jon remains difficult to grasp, or even like, with his peculiar combination of outrage and naiveté. The secondary characters, his friends Peter and George and girlfriend Megan, all seem more real. Greater exposition on what drove Judah Reed, the chief "child-snatcher," could have broadened the novel's power. Australian readers might spot a few anachronisms relating to their country during this era, but otherwise this is a notable addition to the literature on the child migrant experience.

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### **Becky says**

A highly moving and thought provoking story of the 'export' of children in the mid twentieth century, from children's homes in the uk to Australia. The story follows boys transported at the end of the second world war but draws in details from other 'crusades' Also touched upon is the shameful practice of the forced adoption of aboriginal children. Beautifully written with a compelling story and believable characters, this should do very well this year.

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### **Kate says**

For a book that covers deeply distressing topics – the forced child migration between Britain and Australia that took place after WWII, and the Stolen Generations, Robert Dinsdale's historical novel, *Little Exiles*, is strangely devoid of emotion.

I began expecting to become quickly invested in the characters, particularly given that story begins with an eight-year-old boy, Jon Heather, who is taken by his near-destitute mother to the Chapeltown Boys Home of the Children's Crusade. Jon believes he is at the Crusade for only a few months however he soon realises that his mother is not returning. One by one, the boys at the Crusade are told their mothers are dead and that they are going to Australia to make a better life.

*"...they were being sent to Australia, for sunshine, oranges, milk and honey..."*

At the Crusade in Australia, Jon is abused, as are the other boys. The physical abuse is described in some detail, as well as the poor living conditions. Sexual abuse is alluded to, with references to the 'honoured guests' of the Crusade painting a sinister picture.

*"...if there's one thing you should know, it's keep your head down. Don't go with an honoured guest."*  
*'Why not?'*



*'I don't know, Jon but isn't it funny? A day out with ice cream and big fat steaks and all the lemonade a boy could drink...but once they've been, nobody ever wants to go again. Some things just aren't what they promise.'* “

Eight-years-old and you're told your mother is dead and you're put on a boat to a foreign country. It's heartbreaking. So why didn't I read through constant tears...?

Early scenes where Jon is stoic but ever hopeful work best and good use is made of additional characters who have slightly different (but nevertheless traumatic) experiences at the Crusade. As John grows up, any vulnerabilities he showed in England were gone, and although he pushes on with life in Australia, he is driven by the desire to return 'home' (to England and his mother).

The latter parts of the book felt as though the story was being told through Jon's head, not his heart. Was this deliberate on Dinsdale's part? Perhaps. Maybe that's how you have to be in order to survive such a childhood. I read from a mother's perspective and to see such few chinks in Jon's armour made it difficult to see how he would ever allow himself to be loved.

It's worth mentioning my 'prior knowledge' before starting *Little Exiles*. Margaret Humphreys, a British social worker and whistle-blower on the forced migration scheme, wrote her story, *Empty Cradles* – I haven't read it yet, but did see the 2010 film version, *Oranges and Sunshine*. And I cried from the beginning until the closing credits. I cried so much it gave me a migraine. And before that, was the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), which examines the Stolen Generations. Again, it was a migraine-inducing-hour-and-a-half-of crying.

3/5 Interesting from an historical perspective.

I received my copy of *Little Exiles*, from the publisher, Grove Press, via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Anne says**

Over 3000 children aged between 3 and 14 were shipped to Australia after the end of the War. Around 1000 more sent off to other countries including New Zealand and Canada. Many of these children were sent without their parent's consent, some without their parent's knowledge.

John Heather, the lead character in *Little Exiles* is one of these children. He's been living in a drab children's home in Leeds, his mother could not care for him, his father never returned from the war. Jon and a group of other boys make the long and terrifying journey across the world to Australia.

Australia is far from what Jon was promised. Life in the outback is tough, harsh and almost destroying. The men in charge are cruel. Jon's only goal in life is to return home.

This novel is brutal and to the point, the author pulls no punches and the reader watches as Jon matures in incredibly difficult circumstances. Made all the worse for the reader, as we know that these things really did happen.

Robert Dinsdale's writing is pretty unusual, at times I felt as though there was an almost dreamlike quality to the narrative, yet at others it felt so stark and brutal.

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## **Mark says**

Compelling, captivating, provocative and moving are some words to describe this remarkable book about the deportation of English children during the 1950s. This is the story of a small number of boys from Leeds who are given into the care of a "religious organisation" by destitute parents and then after being told their mothers are dead are sent to remote Western Australia. The story is well written, with magnificently drawn and complex characters. My only negative is that it tended to get a bit bogged down with irrelevant and sometimes offbeat detail, but the central theme remained clear and the story moved forward. A great and thought provoking read.

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