



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This may be the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Wilson, Rohan](#)

(2017)

Father and son dynamic flensed in Ben Hobson's To Become a Whale.

The Australian, July(22), 22 July 2017.

[Book/Film/Article Review]

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/111925/>

© 2017 The Australian

This work is covered by copyright. Unless the document is being made available under a Creative Commons Licence, you must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a Creative Commons License (or other specified license) then refer to the Licence for details of permitted re-use. It is a condition of access that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please provide details by email to qut.copyright@qut.edu.au

Notice: *Please note that this document may not be the Version of Record (i.e. published version) of the work. Author manuscript versions (as Submitted for peer review or as Accepted for publication after peer review) can be identified by an absence of publisher branding and/or typeset appearance. If there is any doubt, please refer to the published source.*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/father-and-son-dynamic-flensed-in-ben-hobsons-to-become-a-whale/news-story/a49fd8b5bd75fedad0a651403c1e8af2>



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This may be the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Wilson, Rohan](#)
(2017)

Father and son dynamic flensed in Ben Hobson's To Become a Whale.
The Australian, July(22).

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/111925/>

© 2017 The Australian

This work is covered by copyright. Unless the document is being made available under a Creative Commons Licence, you must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a Creative Commons License (or other specified license) then refer to the Licence for details of permitted re-use. It is a condition of access that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please provide details by email to qut.copyright@qut.edu.au

Notice: *Please note that this document may not be the Version of Record (i.e. published version) of the work. Author manuscript versions (as Submitted for peer review or as Accepted for publication after peer review) can be identified by an absence of publisher branding and/or typeset appearance. If there is any doubt, please refer to the published source.*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/father-and-son-dynamic-flensed-in-ben-hobsons-to-become-a-whale/news-story/a49fd8b5bd75fedad0a651403c1e8af2>

Father and son dynamic flensed in Ben Hobson's *To Become a Whale*

I have heard it said that men are reluctant to become fathers because we haven't yet finished being children ourselves. There's quite a bit of truth to that, I suspect. But, then, how do any of us become men? Who teaches us? What are the rites of passage that lead us into manhood? These are the questions Brisbane writer Ben Hobson seems to be contemplating in his moving debut novel, *To Become a Whale*.

We meet the father, Walter Keogh, and the son, Sam Keogh, as they're preparing for the funeral of Sam's mother. Her absence will be felt throughout the narrative, re-emerging at key moments as a source of grief and of comfort.

For Sam, a boy of 13, the loss is confusing and disturbing. He struggles to understand why his mother was taken away. Worse, it leaves him with a lonely father who is made distant by grief. Walter can't bear living in the house where his wife died, so he takes Sam out into the coastal bush near Moreton Island and builds a shack for them to live in while he ponders what to do next.

This is where the central tension of the narrative starts to reveal itself. On the one hand, Walter is Sam's whole world. The profound love he feels for his father is present in every action he takes. He studies him closely, learning to read his moods. He emulates his father's ways of speaking and acting.

But, on the other hand, this love often seems one-sided. Sam wants his father's respect and attention, and when it doesn't appear he is deeply hurt. His father expects him to grow up and learn to be a man, but Sam isn't sure exactly how to do that. The dynamic between them falls into a familiar pattern: the reluctant father, the disappointed son.

This dynamic holds steady for the next section of the novel, which is also the most compelling and well-realised. The father and son travel to Tangalooma Whaling Station to work for the season and make enough money to finish building their bush shack. It may come as surprise to many readers that Australia was still heavily involved in whaling as late as the 1960s, when the story is set. Hobson has done his research here.

As Walter and Sam fall into the routine of butchering the whales hauled ashore at the station, we're never left with any doubt that the process moved along exactly how Hobson describes it. It's a process that is as confronting to us as it is to Sam. All the sights and smells are vividly conjured. We struggle along with him to make sense of the slaughter.

But Hobson is making a larger point here about cruelty, too. The work the men do at Tangalooma is hard and ceaseless. There is no shirking or dodging out. It leaves them sucked dry of life. The cruelty of their situation seems tied to the fate of the whales killed and dragged ashore, with everyone reduced by the needless suffering of it all.

We see Tangalooma through Sam's perspective and, try as he might, he can't understand the point of it. His father believes that hard work will raise them up but mostly it keeps them

down. When Sam is unable to work at the same pace as the men, his father loses patience and the rift between them grows even wider. The cruelty perpetuates.

It's worth mentioning at this point a little about how Hobson pulls this all together on the page. In terms of language, his closest contemporary is probably Favel Parrett, author of *Past the Shallows* and *When the Night Comes*. He writes with the same sense of directness that Parret achieves, the same sense of nostalgia for childhood that underpins so much of the emotion in the novel. He lingers for long moments over small details, allowing his readers to fully experience what Sam is seeing and doing.

The book moves at an unhurried pace as scenes build and add to each other. The drama is mostly confined to the day-to-day problems Sam has in understanding the world of older men in which he finds himself. It all feels thoroughly true to life.

To speak too much of the ending would be to give away the game, but I will say that Hobson finds a way to answer the questions raised by the narrative in his own idiosyncratic way. We are left satisfied and hopeful.

If you've enjoyed the work of Tim Winton, Parrett and Sonya Hartnett, then you'll find something to enjoy in *To Become a Whale*. Hobson's work sits comfortably alongside those terrific authors.

Rohan Wilson is the author of two novels, The Roving Party and To Name Those Lost.

To Become a Whale

By Ben Hobson

Allen & Unwin, 404pp, \$29.99