

ANGELS AND DEMONS

A WINTON-ESQUE DEBUT BY PAUL MITCHELL COMES TO GRIPS WITH THE LIGHTNESS AND DARKNESS OF MASCULINITY.

PAUL MITCHELL'S DEBUT novel *We. Are. Family.* is a collection of short stories revolving around various branches of a family, the Stevensons, as they struggle with issues such as domestic violence, mental health, poverty and what it means to be a man.

Although the experiences of the family are steeped in a gritty reality, Mitchell originally called the manuscript *Sightings*, reflecting the spiritual and supernatural elements running through the book. It's difficult to find a character in the book who doesn't believe in UFOs or have a supernatural encounter of some kind. "There's always something pressing around the edges of reality for each character," Mitchell says. "They've all got some kind of belief in something 'other'. If it's not a UFO, it'll be a ghost and if it's not a ghost, it'll be an angel."

We. Are. Family. has received some heavenly praise; a *Books+Publishing* review drew comparisons to Tim Winton's *The Turning* and Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap*. Mitchell's work is told in a similar style: a novel composed of interwoven short stories. While Mitchell names Tim Winton, Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor and Don DeLillo among the authors who inspired him to become a writer, he didn't consciously set out to create something similar to Winton's or Tsiolkas' works. "I really loved writing this style, so chances are I'll return to it more than once. There was a conscious effort to write in that form," he says. "Whether or not I was trying to write like them, well, you're always trying to write like someone who's that good!"

Based in Melbourne, and raised in various South Australian and Victorian country towns, Mitchell is intimately acquainted with the type of settings depicted

in the book; and with how families – and, in particular, men – operate and interact in both rural and urban landscapes.

Having previously published three poetry collections and a short story collection, *We. Are. Family.* was written as part of Mitchell's PhD on Australian masculinity, with fragments having popped up previously as short stories in various literary journals. He was reflecting on similar themes in these stories, before becoming aware they had more in common than he'd initially thought. "I started to gather them together and realised these three characters, they're the same person... Finally this kind of tapestry emerged that is *We. Are. Family.*"

In each story, more is revealed about the Stevensons' troubled and sometimes violent history, but it seems the men in each generation are trying to improve on the one before, to form more functional family relationships and express themselves in healthier ways. With two sons of his own aged seven and 16, Mitchell thinks Australians are moving in the right direction in this regard – away from toxic expectations of "either cutting off your emotions or being angry as your only hope of expression". He's confident we'll continue to improve when it comes to the way we encourage men and boys to behave towards each other and the women in their lives.

"I think there is genuine change happening now. To me, there's just been change after change, especially over the last two years," he says, citing the AFL's first gay pride match held in August as one example.

Mitchell's depiction of poor people in the book shows how mental health issues and poverty can

be intertwined and the generational impacts these issues can have. He focuses a significant portion of his novel on a group of Stevensons who are homeless and camping near train stations. They certainly have their problems, but it's among this branch of the family that you'll find some of the most intelligent characters in the book.

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"They're really quite well-read, educated, smart people," Mitchell says. "I just don't like those binaries, this idea of rich people having all the good things because they've earned them – it's so untrue. They worked hard; well, did they? Did they work any harder than so-and-so? No, they didn't."

While *We. Are. Family.* undoubtedly has its comical moments, it predominantly deals with some hard-hitting and sombre topics. For his next project, Mitchell is looking forward to creating something a bit more light-hearted. As well as a poetry project lurking in the background, he's working on two novels, both hovering around the 20,000-word mark. One is about a former-pimp-cum-social-worker living in a fictional suburb of Melbourne. The other is about three men that used to be in a band who get together to renew their friendship and reform the group. He's not sure which of these novels will come to fruition. "At the moment I've been working on the band one a lot more, but the thing with both of these new ones is that they're both for laughs. There's a lot of comedy."

by **Rebecca Douglas**

» *We. Are. Family.* is out now.

