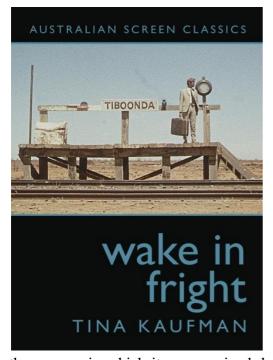***Wake in Fright (Australian Screen Classics)*** by Tina Kaufman. Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency Press / National Film and Sound Archive, 2010, pp. viii + 72, AUD $16.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780868199644 and ***The Boys (Australian Screen Classics)*** by Andrew Frost. Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency Press / National Film and Sound Archive, 2010, pp. viii + 72, AUD $16.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780868199644.

As a collection of short monographs concerned chiefly with the exploration (and confirmation) of Australia's national cinema project, the Australian Screen Classics series traces the ability of local films to reflect and project multifarious notions of Australian identity. Each installment is announced (by series editor Jane Mills) with something of a *prima facie* mission statement, explaining that the series aims to cover films that 'show us at least something of what it is to be Australian'. (v) In the case of two editions published in 2010, that 'something' seems, however worryingly, to be the unremittingly dark, violent masculine malevolence buried deep within the national psyche.

Tina Kaufman's teleological assessment of *Wake in Fright* (Ted Kotcheff, 1971) surveys the cultural and industrial climate from which the film emerged, the conditions under which it was produced, the story of its 'dis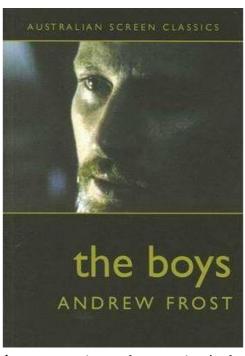appearance' and 'rediscovery', and the manner in which it was received, both on initial release and during re-release in 2009. Kaufman's personal filmgoing story, along with her fleshing out of pre-wave cinema history and insistence on the importance of preserving Australia's national film heritage are both necessary and illuminating, but the meat of this book lies in the fascinating tales behind the film's planning and production phases, and the curious treatment of an important film which lingered for decades in the margins of Australian film history.

Andrew Frost surveys *The Boys* (Rowan Woods, 1998) in a slightly different manner, introducing his 'fragmented' structure as a way of 'following the byways of memory and recollection'. (1) Frost's florid and evocative autobiographical prose weaves in the early filmmaking career of art school colleague Woods – a career which he later refers to as 'a sort of prelude' to *The Boys* (22) – and highlights the social anxieties that tormented 1980s Sydney in the aftermath of the Anita Cobby murder (the event which provided initial impetus for the play on which the film is based). Moving from context to the text itself, Frost highlights the film's narrative structure and visual schemata, provides an extremely detailed synopsis, considers its use of visual metaphor, and touches on its critical reception and unique place in Australian cinema, before ultimately returning to the 'byways' of his own memory.

Despite differing approaches, there are similarities and contrasts to be found between each account. Both films are renowned for their unflinching portrayals of the dark side of Australian masculinity; a bullying culture tinged with a pitch-black sense of menacing 'humour'. It was a dark side made explicit in 1971 by *Wake in Fright*'s bold attack on the Australian male and the national tendency for uncouth small-mindedness and violently aggressive 'mateship'. An adaptation of Kenneth Clark's eponymous novel, it held up 'what many saw as an unwelcome mirror to Australian society at a time when it just wasn't ready for it'. (Kaufman, 7) A quarter of a century later, in reference to adapting *The Boys* from the

stage, screenwriter Stephen Sewell notes having a 'massive determination to say something important about Australia, and the way Australia was, and the way Australian men were'. (Quoted in Frost, 57)

In tracing the dark fringes of Australian masculinity, both films were intentionally crafted to create an air of overwhelming oppression. For *Wake in Fright*, Kaufman cites Kotcheff's insistence that he 'went to infinite pains to never let the audience be free of the heat, the dust, the flies'. (Quoted in Kaufman, 31) Recounting his first viewing of *The Boys*, Andrew Frost recalls feeling 'as though I couldn't breathe – the tension of the film was unrelenting'. (Frost, 10) Like *Wake in Fright*, *The Boys* might be understood as a horror film, with Frost often alluding to producer Robert Connolly's suggestion that 'the drama and tension come from what you weren't seeing, from what was happening just out of frame'. ('The Boys – Filmmakers Talking' DVD extra, Madman, 2003) For Frost, 'this oscillation between *seeing* and *not seeing* is the film's main visual theme' (Frost, 26), later adding that the tactic of '*suggesting* rather than *showing*' has the effect of 'creating considerable tension'. (Both his italics, Frost, 45)

Such oscillations are also key to the on- and off-screen existence of both films, and both books share an interest in the multiplicity of film narrative. Kaufman cites the difference between the events depicted in *Wake in Fright* and what the film is actually 'about' (Kaufman, 7), whilst Frost opens his account of *The Boys* with the guiding assertion that 'there is a story – and then there is the telling of a story'. (Frost, 25) Beyond the screen, similar dichotomies persist in the gulf between the critical and popular reception, with both Kaufman and Frost exemplifying the tendency for 'serious' Australian films to receive high praise from critics, yet find themselves largely ignored by local audiences.

The fervent manliness of each film also gives voice to the far more insidious dichotomy between masculinity and misogyny. It is an important but tangential issue for *Wake in Fright*, and in a study less concerned with textual analysis, Kaufman necessarily addresses it only in passing. In analyzing *The Boys* – a film engulfed by the underlying stain of misogyny pervading a trio of boys raised by a single mother – Frost seems unable to properly grasp its overwhelming significance (a trait also visible in many other accounts of the film). Late in his piece, Frost writes about how, during a conversation with Rowan Woods ten years after the film was released, it dawned on him that 'it isn't about the boys. It is about the girls'. (Frost, 60) And yet he leaves that comment hanging, unaddressed. Earlier, he had glanced over the role of female characters in the film, rather worryingly bracketing them alongside other 'problems' the boys fail to resolve, whilst also considering, in a very rudimentary sense, the problems the women themselves face. (Frost, 49) Far from the three girlfriends simply solving their 'problems' by 'escaping' the oppressive environment of the house, each actively rejects – and, to varying degrees, emasculates – their partner, whilst the ineffectual matriarch is eventually turned upon for her 'failure' as both mother and woman. It is often stated – by Frost, as well as by many of the (largely) male contributors to the 'Filmmaker's Talking' documentary that accompanies Madman's DVD release – that the film is essentially a depiction of one man's attempt to reassert control over his 'kingdom' following his release from prison. But whilst the misogynistic attitude of the boys is evident throughout, it seems fairly unassailable that these 'rejections' provide the motivation for the final act of brutality –

the murder of an innocent young woman – around which the film is structured, and thus for the film itself.

Such points of disagreement, perhaps, signal what is great about the Australian Screen Classics series; rather than simply being fluffy works of rote history, they offer up highly subjective, and thus more engaging, accounts of films of unquestionable national significance. This can also mean, however, that books in the series are sometimes slightly off balance. Kaufman, for example, is far too interested in what *Wake in Fright* meant for the film industry at large, whereas Frost is alternately preoccupied with positioning *The Boys* as an outstanding work of film art, or placing it within a wider climate of social anxiety.

Structural issues also trouble both volumes. Frost includes a very detailed, extended plot synopsis of *The Boys* that, clocking in at almost a quarter of the total page count, seems wholly unnecessary even if you've never seen the film (or, perhaps, especially). Kaufman, meanwhile, elects to relate the story of *Wake in Fright* in more or less chronological order, yet leaves details of the film's reception on its original release until after the restoration section, therefore aligning it with details of the film's triumphant re-release. I would also question the continuing confusion of language utilized by Kaufman (and others), which sees films described as 'lost' when the only things 'missing' are the original negatives or workable, early-generation prints. *Wake in Fright* was not technically 'lost' as is so often claimed by Kaufman (and elsewhere); it merely existed in an inferior state. That said, however, there is no questioning the value of Anthony Buckley's discovery of the original negatives, and the equally interesting (and possibly more crucial, much less feted) story – also detailed in Kaufman's account – of the tireless work to untangle the complicated rights ownership (a potentially more damaging 'loss'), without which the film would have been damned to obscurity beyond the public view, regardless of the quality of print materials.

Ultimately, one can only return to the Australian Screen Classics series' constant struggles with length and function. These are thin books, often too ambitious and voluminous for an essay proper, but not lengthy enough to allow any significant detail. In this regard, the series is consistently torn between its function as reinforcing the Australian national screen canon, and its existence as a collection of particularly excellent primers rather than fully fleshed-out analyses. The fault does not lie with the author of these two creditable volumes, of course, but these are necessarily constricted studies, unable to devote time and space to teasing out, in any great detail, the myriad complexities of two landmarks of Australian cinema.

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