

Hands up: who's seen Scarflies?

TWO LITTLE BOYS by Duncan Sarkies. Penguin, 278pp, \$28. Reviewed by Sean Monaghan.

I thought so. Apparently it's New Zealand's sixth highest-grossing movie, so probably by now most people (over 16, of course, it is rated) who didn't have the chance to see it at the movies have caught up with it on TV or DVD. It's a clever movie which kind-of encapsulates that idea of things being all fun and games until someone puts an eye out — it progresses from a light and breezy comedy into something much darker and bleaker, something quite scary.

Duncan Sarkies co-wrote *Scarflies* with his brother Robert (who directed). Sarkies has also written other film scripts, plays and a collection of short stories. Actually the stories in his book *Stray Thoughts and Nose Bleeds*, which won the Montana Best First Book Award in 2000, are some of the most off-beat, quirky stories you'll come across. Sarkies eschewed the typical New Zealand literary approach and wrote just however he felt. Almost mundane ideas — like a contrived card trick, or the daily grind of work life — are deftly skewered by his very sense of humour.

The stories come at you pretty rapid fire. Why write a moody 3000-word story when a half a page will do? Sarkies toured with a stage show of the stories. In the back of *Stray Thoughts* there's a great photo of, I must assume, Sarkies on stage, beer in hand, ranting at an audience. It seems to fit with the tenor of the stories.

Two Little Boys fits more neatly with the New Zealand



canon — similar in many ways to recent books by other intelligent newish writers like *Rocking Horse Road* by Carl Nixon or *The Lazy Boys* by Carl Shuker, perhaps even to Craig Marriner's much longer novel, *Southern Style*. Novels about young South Island men a bit out of their depths, trying to find their way in the world without too much of a plan.

In *Two Little Boys*, Nige and Deano are best mates and they look out for each other, but there's something a bit deranged under the surface.

Part of the problem is that they both think they're bright enough, but really they're a bit hapless, at times a bit clueless and a bit dense. At one point, Nige is in the bush, admiring the trees, thinking "... and like, all the plants are fighting each other to climb to a place where they can get a bit of sun, and even though we studied photosynthetics at school I never really took in how cool it was."

Needing to hide Jeurgen's body (more on that later),

Deano looks for somewhere without public access because "chances are the public will accessorise it and find Jeurgen tomorrow". Just malapropisms, I know, but Sarkies doesn't overplay this aspect and it's just one of many ways he shows that these guys are a few candles short of mass.

Did I mention that Sarkies is also a renowned playwright? Even though *Two Little Boys* is a novel, it has the feel of being written like a play. There are just three main characters with three minor characters. Oh, there's also a body, but any stage adaptation would probably make do with a leftover guy. The intensity with which the characters are portrayed lends an extraordinary, almost disturbing, feel to the novel.

The body is a clever device — it seems as if the plot revolves around the dead backpacker and Nige and Deano's attempts to resolve events, but really the story is even darker than that. It becomes a murky exploration of obsession and power.

While uplifting and entertaining, the ending is perhaps even bleaker than that of *Scarflies*, with a shattered-looking Willa hitching away from the city.

Also feathering Sarkies's cap of late is that he has written an episode of HBO's *Flight of the Conchords*. Nicely reciprocal, Jermaine is quoted on the cover of *Two Little Boys* saying how cool the book is. Quite appropriate really — all of these guys are very multi-talented.

Filled with laugh-out-loud moments, cringe moments, and duck and cover moments, *Two Little Boys* is a well-paced top-notch psycho-comedy.

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