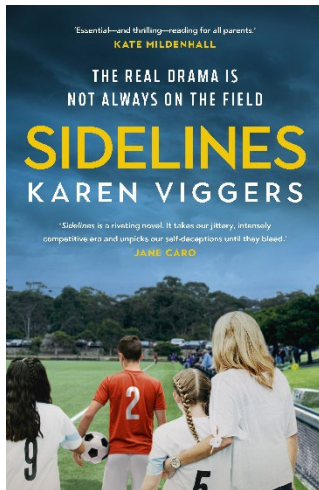


Book Reviews

- ***Sidelines / Karen Viggers* Fiction 2024**
- ***Emergency Exit Only / Michelle Upton* Fiction 2023**

***Sidelines / Karen Viggers* Fiction 2022**



<https://www.betterreading.com.au/>

A teenage sports game descends into a brawl after a controversial line call, in a fast-paced contemporary novel from the bestselling author of *The Orchardist's Daughter*.

When a violent brawl erupts at a suburban junior soccer game, some onlookers are shocked. But others saw it coming. Rivalry, parental pressure, coaching bias, inequity and many other factors have played a part in turning Saturday mornings into a pressure cooker.

Thirteen-year-old Audrey is a talented young football player. But does she want to play for Australia or does she just want to please her father, Ben, whose own thwarted sporting career looms large in his ambitions for his daughter? Audrey's mother, Jonica, doesn't know whether to be more concerned about her anxious daughter, her overbearing husband, or the only other girl on the team, Katerina, who is causing trouble on and off the field. And Katerina's mother, Carmen, is so busy looking for opportunities to give Katerina more game time that she fails to notice what is really capturing her daughter's attention.

When Griffin, a naturally gifted player with spectacular skills, arrives, the tension within the team reaches boiling point. But who is going to crack first – the parents or the players?

Canberra-based author Karen Viggers has an impressive backlist, with four novels, *The Stranding*, *The Lightkeeper's Wife*, *The Grass Castle* and *The Orchardist's Daughter*, preceding her latest, *Sidelines*. Her books are always compulsively readable, without shying away from difficult subject matter.

Viggers has done it again with this timely page-turner. *Sidelines* is a must-read for anyone who found themselves swept up in Matilda's madness during the 2023 World Cup, but the scope of its sharp commentary spans much wider than just soccer or even sports. This is a forensic investigation into contemporary Australian child-rearing, exposing the web of fine lines that lie between supportive encouragement and overwhelming pressure, healthy involvement and helicopter parenting.

Sidelines launches us into disarray and disquiet from the start, with an unidentified figure lying unconscious in the middle of a soccer field during what was supposed to be a regular under-14s game. Viggers then zooms out from this uncannily familiar yet shocking scene, and skilfully, suspensefully reveals a series of seemingly innocuous, everyday occurrences in the team members' family lives that build up to the violent incident.

Viggers has a talent for approaching complex topics from all sides at once. By adopting the perspectives of six very different characters – three teens and three parents – involved in the incident, Viggers refuses to simplify the story down to a straightforward narrative of cause and effect or 'goodies vs baddies'. Your heart will break for all the characters at once, with their flawed humanity evident even – or especially – at the height of some very poor decision-making.

The result is a gripping and very real exploration of contemporary parenting. It's about the culture that surrounds striving for excellence, which so easily turns toxic; the ripples of sexism that undermine supposed egalitarianism in teenage sports; and the environments that breed bullying and affect kids' mental health. It's also a book about coming-of-age in teenhood, and self-realisation in parents of teens. Yes, all this from the sidelines of a youth soccer game!

As we head into another school year, with our kids' extracurricular commitments about to increase exponentially, now is the time to pick up this thought-provoking read. It's a definite must-read for anyone who's found themselves screaming on the sidelines of a children's sporting event – or side-eyeing a fellow spectator doing the same!

Readers should be aware that *Sidelines* includes graphic depictions of self-harm.

Industry Comment

<https://www.goodreads.com/>

'Essential - and thrilling - reading for all parents.'

KATE MILDENHALL

'Sometimes a novel comes along that says what you've been thinking.'

MALCOLM KNOX

'will leave you wondering if perhaps winning and losing are the same thing.'

GABBIE STROUD

'Viggers shines a light on the ways competition can pull us together or drive us apart.'

INGA SIMPSON

Book Review

Emergency Exit Only / Michelle Upton Fiction 2023



<https://www.betterreading.com.au/>

A hilarious, big-hearted story about second chances from the author of *Terms of Inheritance*.

No evacuation plan, no safety net... Sometimes you just have to save yourself.

Amelia Harris has played it safe all her life – but when a minor accident lands her in hospital, she dramatically quits the tedious office job she’s been working at for a decade.

When her mother, Toni, asks her what she wants to do, Amelia is at a loss. Out of sheer desperation, she tries her hand at the dream jobs she’s always fantasised about. Soon Amelia’s shadowing a thrilling cast of characters and professions – as a journalist, a florist, a wedding planner, a zookeeper, and more. Life couldn’t be more exciting, especially when she meets the man of her dreams.

But when Toni drops a truth bomb about their family, Amelia’s whole world tilts on its axis. Meanwhile, each new job starts taking on a life of its own. Has she created a monster?

As she’s about to find out, where there’s smoke, there’s fire, and sometimes you just have to save yourself.

BR readers first fell for Michelle Upton with the release of her warm and witty debut, *Terms of Inheritance*. The Birmingham-born novelist is now a resident of Redlands Coast in Queensland, and her love for the place and the community shines through in her writing. Second novels are notoriously difficult, but what Upton has come up with might even be better than her first!

Emergency Exit Only is full of heart, poignancy, hilarity, astute observations, relatable mishaps and *The Alchemist* references. It’s a heartwarming romcom, but it’s not a book about finding your other half. It’s a family drama, but it sprawls out beyond the nuclear unit in a way that feels fresh and contemporary, placing an emphasis on community that I think we could all use more of right now.

I loved this book from the first page with its hilarious and ingenious premise – I mean, work experience for grown-ups? Count me in! If you’re someone who feels like you’ve never really found your true purpose, this is such an inspiring read. Amelia proves it’s never too late to find yourself, your people and your passion. She’s still working it out at 35, but her lessons are applicable for any age – as proven by her beautifully eccentric mum Toni (who might have been my favourite secondary character).

Upton delves into some difficult themes relating to mental health, which the publisher acknowledges with a content warning at the front of the book. But for me, Amelia's journey to self-realisation was nothing but uplifting.

Emergency Exit Only is an ideal holiday read – the perfect balance of feel-good and thought-provoking. If you've ever wanted to rage-quit your job, or you're dreading going back to the office after the festive break, or perhaps you've always wondered where a different life path might have taken you... this is the read for you!

Comments by Other Authors

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/>

'Amelia Harris is the heroine you didn't know you needed but you'll be very glad you met. Whimsical and heartfelt, *Emergency Exit Only* leads you directly to a great beach read with an unforgettable heroine' - Sophie Green, author of *Weekends with the Sunshine Gardening Society*

'I adored Amelia's journey of self-discovery ... A fun read with a truckload of heart about following your dreams - and discovering exactly what those dreams are' - Kelli Hawkins, author of *Apartment 303*

'A sweet summer read with charming, nostalgic rom com vibes and a touching heart' - Vanessa McCausland, author of *Dreaming in French*

'A relatable romp that proves that it's never too late to find your way' - Clare Fletcher, author *Love Match*

'Upbeat and full of heart, *Emergency Exit Only* is guaranteed to make you smile. A tender, funny tale about the pursuit of a happier life. Michelle's storytelling is delightful' - Jessica Seaborn, author of *Perfect-ish*

'Divine ... Upbeat, funny and with characters who will make you laugh and cry' - Meredith Jaffe, author of *The Tricky Art of Forgiveness*

'Funny, poignant and thought-provoking, *Emergency Exit Only* is a delightful read from start to finish.' - Penelope Janu, author of *Shelter from the Storm*

'Funny, relatable and warm-hearted, this story is a joy' - Cass Moriarty, author of *Parting Words*