

SIDELINES

KAREN VIGGERS

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

'Sidelines is a riveting novel. It takes our jittery, intensely competitive era and unpicks our self-deceptions until they bleed.'

JANE CARO



KAREN VIGGERS

ON THE INSPIRATION FOR *SIDELINES*

HOW DID THE IDEA FOR *SIDELINES* ORIGINATE?

Sidelines is about parental behaviour at junior sport and how this reflects onto children. It came from more than fourteen years of standing on the sidelines watching my own kids play and referee soccer. During that time, I witnessed a lot of interesting behaviour, including my own. As far as I know, this is the first time there's ever been a novel like this, looking at kids' sport and how overinvested parents can get, to the extent that a brawl can break out at a junior soccer game.

This actually happened at an U12s game in my home town. It was a boys Premier League game with a few girls playing on one of the teams. Two kids started hitting each other over a disputed line-call by a junior referee, then a parent ran onto the field and grabbed one of the kids by the throat, then another parent got involved and a brawl broke out.

The most disturbing thing is that my daughter could have been there that day, but she missed out on selection because of an injury, so she was playing elsewhere. I knew many of the parents and kids who were there, and I was shocked. How could kids start hitting each other on the field? And what sort of parents would get so pumped up that a kids' soccer game would end up in a fight? Were they ordinary people like me? Or were they flawed, *bad* parents? This became the trigger for *Sidelines*.

I knew this wasn't an isolated event, because I was regularly seeing reports about these kinds of things on the media: young and old referees being assaulted, serious fights, terrible head injuries. The fact is, there are millions of parents out there, jockeying with each other on the sidelines, trying to live vicariously through their kids, and trying to give their kids advantage. And yet none of this reflects the positive reasons why we want our kids to play sport or participate in activities. It seems that, these days, many of us view our children's success as a measure of own success.

In writing this book, I wanted to explore our society's obsession with success, and the ways in which it puts pressure on families. I drew on observations I've made from the sidelines of football fields, as well as through talking to other parents. I also had to take a deep look at my own behaviour and the impact it had on my family. So, in many ways, this is lived experience for me.

It's my hope that *Sidelines* will provide insights that are relevant to parents all over the world, not just those with kids playing soccer, but any sport or activity. Writing this book has allowed me to let go of my own missteps as a parent, or at least to acknowledge and take responsibility for my actions along the way. It is not my story. Nor is it my family's story. However, I hope you will find it as thought-provoking to read as I did in my own deep self-reflection as I wrote it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KAREN VIGGERS

is a novelist, wildlife and domestic animal veterinarian, and podcaster. She is the author of *The Stranding*, *The Lightkeeper's Wife*, *The Grass Castle*, *The Orchardist's Daughter* and *Sidelines*. Her work is set in Australian landscapes and communities, and explores contentious issues, such as dying with dignity, displacement of First Peoples, wildlife conservation, clear-felling of native forests, and now, modern parenting and junior sport. She is co-host of the *Secrets From the Green Room* podcast in which she interviews writers and other book industry colleagues about books and writing. Her novels have been translated into several languages and have enjoyed great success in France where she is a bestselling author and has won a literary award. Karen is the mother of two adult children. She lives on Ngunnawal and Ngambri land in Canberra with her ecologist husband. *Sidelines* is her fifth novel.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- *Sidelines* is a commentary on modern society and parenting. What do you think the novel says about our attitudes to junior sport? Success? Modern urban life? The pressures on teenagers?
- Jonica is clearly supportive of her children. Do you think she is living vicariously through them, or are there other reasons behind her investment in their lives?
- Is Jonica simply a normal mother? What is expected of mothers in our society?
- What values do you think should be taught at home, and what should be taught at school?
- Jonica keeps saying she wants to go back to work, but is this really what she desires? Or are there other factors at play here?
- What do you think of her relationship with Ben?
- Carmen has a very different relationship with her husband Ilya. What is working well in their marriage?
- Carmen uses certain tactics to gain favour with coach Dominik in the hope of winning support and game time for Katerina. Is this fair, or is it just the way life works?
- What values and principles are important when coaching young people, especially in team sport? Does Dominik embody this? If not, what is flawed about his approach? What would you do differently?
- Audrey struggles with finding her place in the team. She's being bullied. What is the responsibility of the coach in this situation? The parents? Do you think the problem could have been detected earlier and handled differently?
- Audrey wishes her father, Ben, would take the time to understand her. How does this play out in her relationship with him? And how can busy career-focussed parents find ways to connect with their children and provide support without pushing them? Or is it okay to push children to achieve? Does it depend on the child?
- Audrey's friendship with Griffin helps her to find confidence. How important are friendships for teens? What are some of the difficulties young people experience in friendships? How can parents guide them in this, or is it up to young people to find their own way?
- Katerina's personality and circumstances are different from Audrey's. Is her behaviour towards Audrey understandable? Excusable? Is this just normal teenage girl behaviour?
- What do you think of the way Katerina's parents handle the situation between their daughter and Audrey? How would you handle a problem like that?

JUST FOR FUN

- Who would you cast in a screen adaptation of *Sidelines*?
- If you could have a chat with any character from the novel, who would it be and why? What would you like to ask them?
- Pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly moving or interesting and read it to the group.

