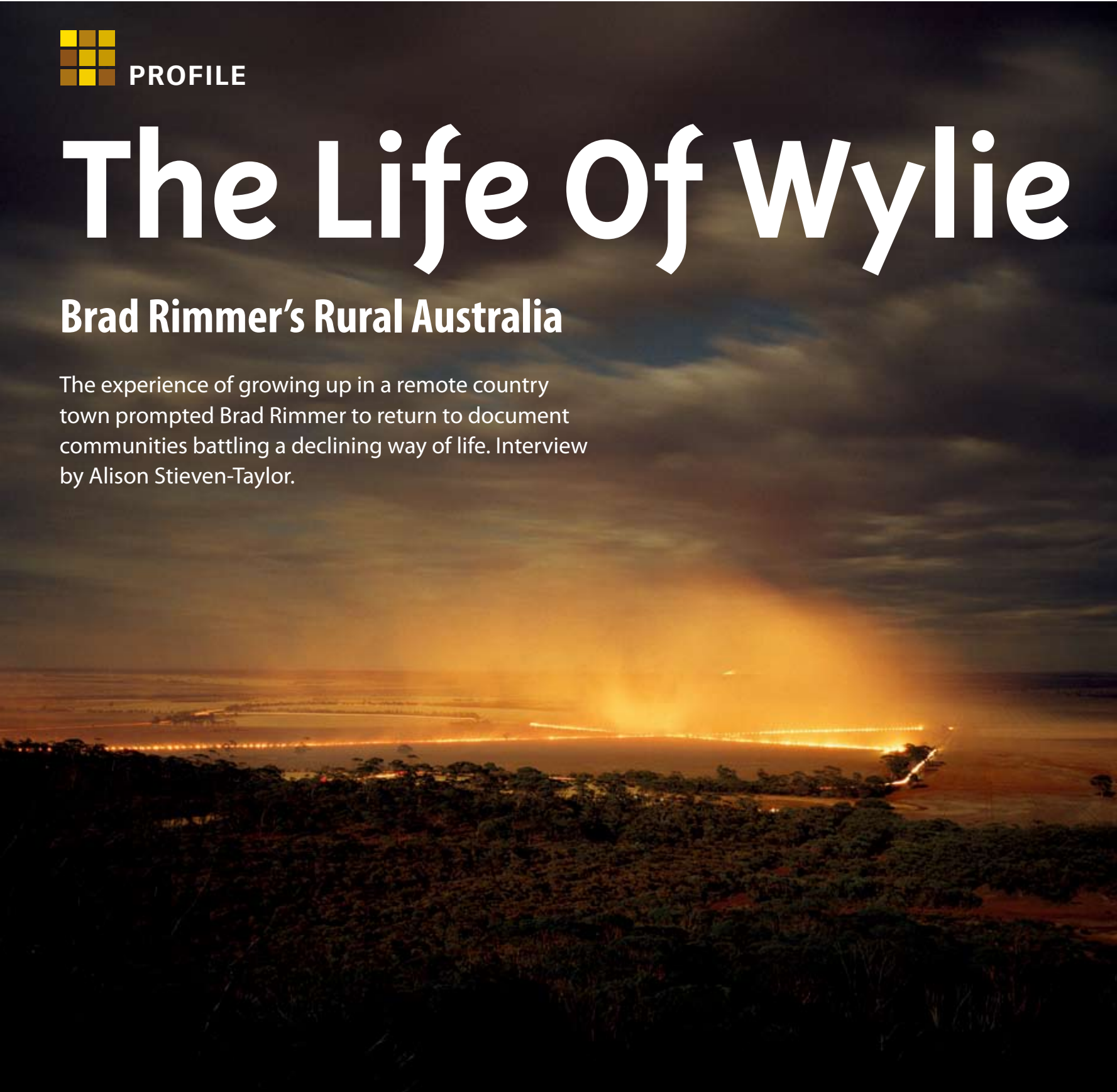


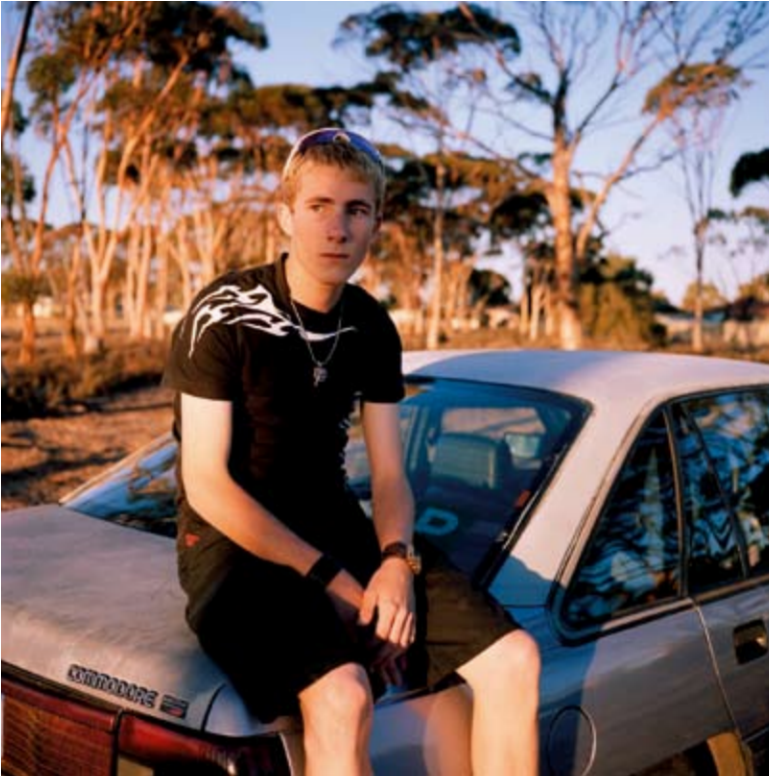


The Life Of Wylie

Brad Rimmer's Rural Australia

The experience of growing up in a remote country town prompted Brad Rimmer to return to document communities battling a declining way of life. Interview by Alison Stieven-Taylor.





When photographer Brad Rimmer's book *SILENCE The Western Australian Wheatbelt* came across my desk recently I was immediately drawn to the contrasting colours of the Australian landscape depicted in his photographs – a cobalt blue sky falls to meet the soft golden tones of the wheat fields, houses sit on red dust bleached by a merciless sun, a strip of black asphalt shimmers in the heat as it stretches towards the horizon.

The imagery is familiar to me. In 1986 I took a journey across the Nullarbor Plain in a VW Kombi, making the trek from Melbourne to Perth, expecting a vista of red earth and sparse vegetation. I remember marvelling at the kilometres of wheat fields out in the middle of nowhere and remarking on how difficult it would be to live in a place like that so far from the city lights.

Brad Rimmer *did* live there. He spent his childhood in the wheatbelt in the town of Wyalkatchem, 194 kilometres north-east of Perth on the Goomalling-Meeredin Road or the Pioneer Pathway, as the local shire romantically refers to "Wylie's" location.

The photographs in *SILENCE* are not landscapes, but rather they are short stories; portraits of a time forgotten when townships were prosperous and the concept of community alive and well. And they are reminders of what happens when the economies-of-scale come into play and towns that were once vibrant contributors become dots on roads no longer travelled, their inhabitants left with two choices – leave and survive or stay and stagnate.

Brad has captured the wheat towns of his youth, portraying communities that have seen more hard knocks than most and displayed a fighting spirit that would have failed many. So much of Australia's rural history lies in the determination of individuals and families to stay the course. In what is literally the middle of nowhere, communities have thrived, died and revived for generations, their fate falling on the fortunes of the next crop and their social lives confined by the hundreds of kilometres separating them from the rest of civilisation.

"When all the nonsense around that Bill Henson shot came out people became more cautious. On my second shoot I had to seek permission to take portraits and felt those shots were more contrived, less casual than my earlier shots."

Avoiding The Issues

With a population of just 200, "Wylie" is a typical small Australian country town; its youth plagued by a common complaint – boredom – and by the absence of any hope for the future.

Like many of his compatriots, Brad left when he was 18 to study in Perth. Most of the young people from these towns leave with no intention of returning, "...because there isn't anything to go back for", Brad tells me. The Rimmers ran a farm machinery business, but Brad had no interest in selling tractors.

"I wanted to do something creative, but that was a little difficult to pursue in Wyalkatchem. I had a close friend who was also interested in the arts. We both played football because, if you were good at sport, you could get away with being creative and not copping too much shit for it. That's the masculine side of country life."

Painting was his first choice, but he turned to photography "...when I discovered that I wasn't that good at painting after all", he laughs.

When Brad returned to his hometown to begin work on what became *SILENCE*, he found little had changed, including his own feelings towards the place.

"There's a photo within the book of a street intersection with one house on the corner with a light on. That image brought back the same feelings I had as a kid, riding my pushbike back from the pool, the summer light."

The word "silence" has many connotations and Brad has explored its range in this book. He tells me that one central theme – the closed nature of country communities – is something he was keen to portray.

"In the country... in small towns, people tend to shut down and gloss over the real issues," says Brad. Issues like the rising number of youth suicides and the alarming death rate from road accidents. Both were frequent tragedies that impacted on Brad's youth. And are still issues today.

Brad lost numerous friends to speed and, as he had the only tow truck in town, it was often his father's grisly task to attend accidents where he knew the victims.

"Dad would have to deal with the fatalities, with knowing the kids. Those deaths really affected the community, but people didn't want to talk about it."

When the drink driving laws changed in the early 1970s, the locals were more concerned about "killing off the pub" than acknowledging alcohol's role in many of the fatal road accidents.

"As a kid I was completely spooked about driving around with the family on country roads and coming across an accident. In the country you are far more aware about life and death."

One of the photographs in *SILENCE* that is powerful in its simplicity is that of skid marks on the asphalt.

"Skidding is like tagging for the kids out there," explains Brad. "There isn't anything else to do and these kids are struggling to change, to survive."



Right Of Passage

Planning the first shoot, Brad thought about photographing sites where he'd lost friends and where communities had mourned their future, but the concept was too limiting. Instead he chose to feature the role of the car in remote locations and there are several photographs in the book illustrating the importance of having a set of wheels when you're a country kid.

"Having a car is about status, about freedom. When you get your licence you can move around and visit other small towns. It's a right of passage."

SILENCE was shot over two trips. There were days on end when Brad traversed the network of roads never shooting a frame.

"I spent so much time driving around, hoping to come across someone. In some of the towns I travelled through I couldn't find any young people who had stayed past turning 18."

In their heyday the wheatbelt towns were tight-knit communities with the local hall the central gathering place for young and old. But as fortunes have shifted so the fabric of these townships has worn thin.

Brad's images reveal an apathy that limits opportunity and closes the door on the future for many, particularly young women. Those who don't leave, Brad tells me, are likely to be pregnant by 18 with a predictable path ahead of them.

When Brad first went back to the 'old neighbourhood' he was somewhat of a mini-celebrity. Locals knew the Rimmer name – his grandmother still lived there until 2008 – and they had followed his career. He had little trouble getting people to pose for him, when he could find them.

"The first shoot was very spontaneous and many of the portraits from that trip had a more natural composure," he recalls.

But when he went back a year later the welcome mat was no longer out.



"When all the nonsense around that Bill Henson shot came out people became more cautious. On my second shoot I had to seek permission to take portraits and felt those shots were more contrived, less casual than my earlier shots."

And there was the run-in with the father of a teenage girl he photographed. "I had to give up the film to him", says Brad, still incredulous.

Poignant Scenes

The collection depicts a number of poignant scenes. For instance, the drive-in cinema screen that hasn't had a film projected on it in years, its rusting struts the colour of the earth, and sparse clumps of grass taking over the spaces where cars full of young people and families once gathered.

Houses look out on streets that are bordered by an endless expanse of red earth, rocks and spindly vegetation, the natural habitat impinging on fence

lines, a sense of imminent invasion and reclamation by the desert a lost battle for weary residents.

Young men stand defiant in fields or with their cars. Teenage mothers play with an infant, the family's rifle within easy reach on the aged couch. 'For Sale' signs vie for the attention of passersby. Wheat fields glow red at night as flames lick across the paddocks.

And a young indigenous girl stands proud. Brad says the girl's grandmother spent a day with him "...checking me out before agreeing to the portrait. She showed me the reserve on the edge of town and told me about her life. Sharon [the young girl] is strong, dignified and proud of her background and culture. I wanted to capture those qualities".

Asked if he thinks the themes in *SILENCE* will be universally understood, Brad draws a parallel with his series of photographs about China titled *How Now Mao*.

"The motivation may be different – economic, political – but everyone has to decide if they are going to leave or stay in a place at some point. When I was shooting in China, I talked to people about their aspirations and their dreams, and so many wanted to make their fortunes by moving to the city. That's a common thread in all rural communities."

SILENCE The Western Australian Wheatbelt is published by T&G Publishing Sydney. A limited edition of prints from the book is also available. **RP**

Alison Stieven-Taylor is an author and photographer based in Melbourne. For more information visit www.realityillusion.com and www.astloveslife.blogspot.com. Her latest book, Rock Chicks, profiles the leading female rock stars from the 1960s to today.

All photographs by Brad Rimmer, copyright 2010.