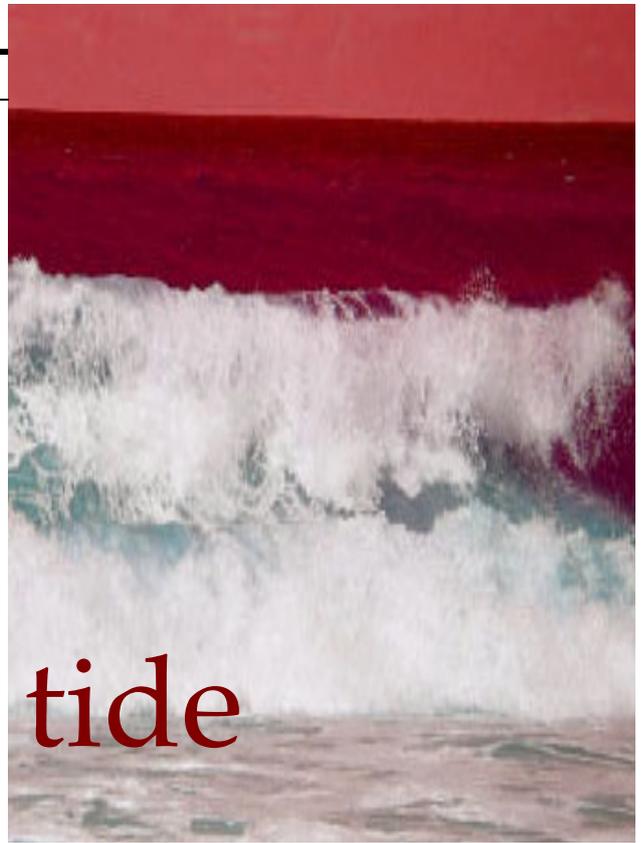


It's the age of the pressure pot – worrying about the future, an eroding sense of self... all in a day, in the life of an adolescent. **Enoch Lau** explores the dreams that have never come true.

Turning the crimson tide



He was dead on the night before his eighteenth birthday. His parents found him in his bed, lying motionless on the crimson-soaked sheets; he had slit his wrists. One week later, they held a funeral – to celebrate his life, they said. Time seemed to stand still or rush past at the speed of light or both at once. It was so quick; no one saw it coming.

That was three years ago, just a month before our HSC examinations were due to begin. It shocked everyone who knew him, because outwardly, he seemed the same as he always was. One day, we were having the fun of our lives kicking a ball around after school; the next, we were dressed in black, our expressions dressed equally with emotion.

It is difficult to describe adequately how it feels to have known a victim of suicide. I say 'victim', because it is the inadequacies of the system that failed them, a system unable to realise the complex multi-dimensional nature of adolescents. Where are the safeguards or the support networks? Where?

Recently, I watched *Looking for Alibrandi* (2000), based on the well-loved book of the same name, and it reminded me of the difficulties that adolescents face in the transition to adulthood. It is a time of discovery, a time of finding out who you are, and where you want to go in your life. It is a

period of experimentation, of increasing independence, and of course unbelievable pressure.

LFA follows Josie Alibrandi during her final year of high school. It is definitely more dramatic than what happens in real life, but director Kate Woods has captured the essence of the highs and lows of teenage life into a terrific little teenage flick, a rarity in Australian filmmaking.

Despite going from crisis to crisis, the protagonist remains strong-willed, able to adapt to all the challenges thrown at her. She falls in love for the first time, confronts death face on for the first time, and if that is not enough, she meets her father for the first time. Thus, this transitional period – all in the short space of a year – can radically change a young adult's outlook on life.

We all know that young people are keen to experiment. Many choose to experiment with drugs or alcohol, or even sex. It is all part of that youthful exuberance – the hormones, the rush of energy. Young people do it as a statement that they want to move on to the next stage of their lives. Even if it is not sex, drugs or alcohol, all young people have a tendency to experiment and try things out for themselves. Some parents, though, see things differently.

If you like, you can break life up into a

number of stages; I'll use the example of eating an acorn. An acorn is a whole, sheathed in its casing. You crack it open, exposing half of the nut; the crisp acorn already reflects a golden yellow in the sunlight. Then you remove the rest of its exterior, realising that each acorn has a unique shape and size; it looks wholesome. You pop it into your mouth and after a brief moment of sheer bliss, it's over.

In the same way, parents who have set ideas about their children's future are leaving them permanently half encased in their shell; their full potential cannot be expressed. Surely, someone who can play a part deciding the nation's future by voting has the ability to be successful without using a formula set down by his or her parents.

There are pressures to conform to the norm, which stifles and unduly discriminates against those who choose to be different, such as in their chosen career path. There are pressures to perform well at school, even more so for those whose desire is to go to



An acorn is a whole, sheathed in its casing... You pop it into your mouth and after a brief moment of sheer bliss, it's over.

"what's important is who I feel I am," her inner constituency.

Did you know that one in eleven suicides occur directly because of the final school exams, which for many people appears to be a hundred-storey fortress surrounded by a marshland moat, where people—their peers and their friends—get bogged down every day? You have to wonder how many other young people choose to take the easy route out because their first love dumped them, or they believe this war-torn world has no



There are pressures to conform to the norm... there are pressures to perform well at school.

university (or whose parents would like them to go to university). Most will survive these artificial pressures, but like Josie in *LFA*, it is Mission Impossible without some form of support, whether that be family, friends or other adults with whom they have contact. Otherwise, there is a risk that our young people will think life is a single corridor, long and narrow with an 'exit' sign at the very end.

In turn, these pressures come from the entire world, the society and the fabric of which it forms an integral part. In many cases, in order to be even considered for a job interview, you need that piece of paper. Full stop. No flexibility – you are forced to play by the rules. All of this can be extremely daunting for someone who has just moved out of the protective world of high school and into the wider community, where support services, while they exist, are far and apart. Sometimes still, one must reach into their own sanctuary, like Josie, who feels that

future. Adolescence is a period when any change appears like a threat, when that next test seems like the end of the world, when that next job interview feels like the path to failure.

Truthfully, there is nothing artificial about Kate Woods' portrayal of death in *LFA*; it is never romanticised and strikes all the characters in the film equally, friends or antagonists, teenagers or adults. That's how it should be. Just remember that all of these deaths are entirely preventable, but it can only be done through diligence.

Next week, I'll be hosting a high school reunion. Naturally, there will be much catching up to do, finding out where people have chosen to take their lives. We are the survivors, the ones who have made it through. As Josie remarks, "We're not cursed, we're blessed." It's easy to die; anyone can do it. Living, with its ebbs and flows of continuous change, is the challenge. ■