

Joanna Murray-Smith. *Sunnyside*. Penguin Viking 2005.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

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The cover of Joanna Murray-Smith's new novel *Sunnyside* seems to promise a desperate-housewives style melodrama. But *Sunnyside* is actually quite a serious novel, intent on exploring difficult questions about modern life, about motherhood and feminism and sex as both a creative and destructive force.

Alice, a novelist and her husband Harry, a university lecturer, have left the excitements of inner-city life and moved to Sunnyside, an affluent beachside suburb where real estate is 'the number two hobby of locals *after* tennis and *before* golf.' The city might be Sydney, but it might also be any other Australian coastal capital. This isn't important: it's what Sunnyside represents that is basic to the novel. It is safety, security, family values, and stifled creativity. Alice develops writers' block as soon as she moves into her perfect home on two acres of prime real estate.

The safety and security are, of course, illusory. This becomes clear when the marriage of their friends Molly and David is shattered by Molly's irresponsible and unexpected fling with the swimming pool man. Swimming pools, in fact, play a major role in the plot. Murray-Smith has used them as a setting and a catalyst, though throughout the novel no-one ever uses one for its primary purpose – swimming. They might represent the dangers and troubles which are involved in the upkeep of expensive and basically useless status symbols for those who have 'appetites beyond good taste, good reason, good ethics.'

In this setting of conspicuous consumption and snobbery, Murray-Smith tries to encapsulate modern life's peculiar set of difficulties, especially for women and for marriages. 'Since the nineteen-fifties, when places like Sunnyside had first established themselves as affluent refuges from the real world, suburban women had lost their one great justification: the belief that they had no other place to be. ... They had struggled against their own maternal urgings, their happy laziness, their pleasure in men ... and, instead, made for the academies. ... Alice was part of the generation to rediscover ... ordinariness, conscious of what she was forsaking. It was a liberation from liberation,

although no woman seemed to sit easily in the strange mix of expectations that feminism had provoked.'

Passages like these give *Sunnyside* a slightly preachy quality at first. Later in the novel this kind of musing is more easily attributed to the characters and less intrusive. In fact Murray-Smith provides many points of view. She presents the children of these affluent people, knowing teenagers and near-teens. The precocious Grace, Harry and Alice's daughter, at 11 understands that '*You could not trust parents. They were full of bad impulses that they could not or would not control. They were always making decisions that were in their own interests and then jazzing them up to sound as if they were in the best interests of the children.*' Not the least of Alice and Harry's problems is to find a way of parenting such a child.

There is drama in *Sunnyside*, but there is also much reflection. There is a feeling of narrowly-missed peril constantly surrounding Harry and Alice and their children. This makes for a good read, and though the generalisations Murray-Smith proposes are sometimes highly debatable, and at other times nothing very new, she makes it fairly clear, by providing multiple points of view, that she doesn't intend them as the last word on the psychology of modern Australian life.