

Cath Kenneally, *Jetty Road* (Wakefield Press, 2009)

Cath Kenneally, poet, writer and the popular arts producer and broadcaster at Radio Adelaide, is a past winner of the Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship, and if one is to judge on the basis of the novel that resulted from that (*Room Temperature*, Wakefield Press, 2001) and her new one, *Jetty Road*, a product of a creative writing PhD, nothing could be more appropriate. Like Hanrahan, Kenneally's fiction moves in and out of autobiography, drawing inspiration from her own life and family background, and is centred around the same Adelaide suburb in which she grew up. If Hanrahan immortalised Rose Street, Thebarton (her family home is gone but you can stroll down Barbara Hanrahan Lane), Kenneally seems set to do the same for *Jetty Road*, Glenelg.

Like the author herself (and Carmel in *Room Temperature*), Evie Haggerty is one of five sisters (and a brother, deceased) in a large working-class Irish-Australian family, but her closest relationship is with her youngest sister Paula, even though there are secrets on both sides. Paula, 40, is divorced from Gary, with a young daughter, Rosie and a teenage son Bert, and is matron at a nursing home. The sisters live near each other at Glenelg and Evie provides after-school care for Rosie while accepting casual stints in childcare centres and volunteer work with the parish help line, Lifelink. She's at the start of a promising relationship with George, a Greek-Australian some twenty years her junior, who is teaching her to cook and to have a good time in bed, an improvement on her previous life working in a Melbourne massage parlour while entangled in a destructive drug-driven relationship with an abusive addict called Ronnie. Paula's life has also picked up, thanks to a local barman called Chris, but young Bert is in danger of writing himself off with drugs and booze and Evie, unbeknownst to Paula, is trying to straighten him out. Things are getting a little tense when Ronnie reappears, bent on revenge.

Jetty Road is episodic rather than narrative writing. Kenneally isn't terribly interested in plot, and there isn't much of one here. Instead, she enjoys taking a large cast of related characters and recording the ordinary and random details of their day-to-day lives as they inter-connect and take frequent side trips down Memory Lane. There's a lot of pleasure to be had in following along, particularly down familiar paths, but the technique has its risks. The first chapter introduces twenty-five named characters, and readers would be wise to make notes because another twenty or so join the story in chapter two. The result is too many sentences like, '*Apparently Ashley had found a message for Trish from Gary on their answering machine, finally ringing Jenny in case Trish'd taken the car to Gary...*'; and, '*Paula, preoccupied with Evie's treachery, and anxiety about Zak and Bert, hadn't got around to inviting Chris.*' To complicate matters further, Evie is writing a trashy romance set on a Greek island, and readers are given frequent updates on the entanglements of Dana, Christos, Aristos and Maria. At a certain point, I began to skip these, just as I began to skip the numerous accounts of dreams.

But I enjoyed immensely the lively dialogue and the parts of the novel set in matron Paula's Holmwood, where the introduction of market gardening and the opportunity to do some authentic home-cooking injects new life and enthusiasm into

some of the gentle, infuriating and eccentric inmates – such as old Mrs Gallina, who comes into her own amidst the pots and pans and stewing tomatoes, and who is described as a 'Nigella and Jamie and the fat ladies all rolled into one'. Evidently a prodigious consumer of popular culture, Kenneally has packed her novel with references to songs, films, books, celebrities, musicals and television shows, from Madonna and Guy Ritchie to *Clueless*, *Mary Poppins* and *42 Up*. (But Simon and Garfunkel definitely never wrote anything called 'The 69th [sic] Bridge [sic] Street Song'.)

Kenneally's women have two compulsions: one is to clean house, and the other is to drink tea. When they're not putting the kettle on, Evie and Paula grab the mop and the Jif and give things a good scrub. The 'old urge', Paula calls it, considering it a healthier alternative than grabbing a bottle of gin, and she's training young Rosie in the domestic arts, even though she worries that she's 'turning her girl into somebody's future slave'. I worried about all the cleaning, too – couldn't Kenneally find other things for her characters to do? – but then I happened to read a comment from British novelist and reviewer Philip Hensher. Perplexed by the contemporary novel's preoccupation with sex, Hensher argues that 'you learn a lot more about a character watching them do the washing up'. I went back and read with a fresh eye the description of Paula up on a stool with her bleach and cleaning rag, straining to scrub the very back of the shelves, and Evie furiously vacuuming the sofa Ronnie has been sitting on, 'using the strongest suction and the bare nozzle'.

Jetty Road is an enjoyable, frequently amusing, acutely observed, gossipy family saga that will appeal to many women readers, but it does tend to ramble. Kenneally has a writer's soul but she needs to develop an editor's discipline. Like the creative writing student Georgia in Alice Munro's story 'Differently' (whom Kenneally quotes in her epigraph to *Room Temperature*), she includes 'too many things', 'too many people', and she repeats herself. She needs an editor who will do for her what, in *The September Issue*, Anna Wintour does for her creative director, Grace Coddington: cull. Someone who will select the best work and ruthlessly discard the rest, no matter how brilliant or clever it is or how long it took to produce.

Ruth Starke