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Jessica White. *A Curious Intimacy*. Penguin Viking, 2007.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writer's Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded on 26 May 2007.

A Curious Intimacy is the first novel by Jessica White, and relates the adventures of Ingrid Markham, an Adelaide woman travelling in Western Australia in the 1870s. Ingrid is 'unconventional', riding through the bush alone to collect botanical specimens for the book she is illustrating for her father, sometimes dressed in trousers, and spurning the male sex. On her travels she meets Ellyn Ives, a young wife whose husband is away indefinitely seeking feed for his cattle, and who is desperate with grief after the recent death of her baby. The 'curious intimacy' is what grows between these two women.

Ingrid is trying to recover from the loss of Helena, her lover who has been forced to marry. Ellyn gradually takes her place in Ingrid's affections, causing a certain amount of spiteful innuendo among the neighbours and townspeople. And then Ellyn's husband returns.

This is not a bad scenario for a novel: a strong, intellectual heroine, braving the condemnation of a society which is not ready for such independent women. Unfortunately White achieves none of this potential. Since Ingrid is narrating in the first person, the prose is presumably intended to mimic nineteenth-century language, but only succeeds in being mannered and laboured. The symbolism is heavy-handed – the similarity between Ingrid's botanical specimens and female genitalia is freighted with heavy significance – and the similes are often inept: 'His voice was like a stone breaking ice on a pond': how would an Adelaide girl know what that sounds like? The dialogue, too, is stilted and long winded. Ellyn tells Ingrid about a widow who 'makes

articles such as babies' clothes, which she sends to a cousin in Perth to sell for her.' Every time a visit is made, all the preliminary greetings and introductions are rolled out. At first I looked for the nuance in these passages, some evidence of subtle characterisation, but I soon found they were simply filling up half a page when one sentence would do.

And perhaps worst of all, the characters are as wooden as the jarrah forests surrounding Ellyn's house, which, of course, her husband is intending to cut down. There is a multitude of forgettable minor characters who play little part in the narrative, but who are nevertheless introduced in some detail. There is perhaps an unusual number of unhappy wives, although there is also one unhappy husband – perhaps a token towards gender balance to forestall accusations of bias. For, apart from Ingrid's father and a couple of other kindly father-figures, the men in this novel are a thoroughly rotten bunch – abusive, violent, inconsiderate and intolerant.

Ingrid herself is difficult to like. She seems moody, selfish and humourless. In some novels this wouldn't be a problem: first-person narrators can be unreliable, and the author can speak through them to convey a quite different message from the one the character seems to be expressing. But in *A Curious Intimacy* there doesn't appear to be any such authorial irony at work.

While Ingrid is away on one of her botanising expeditions, Ellyn reads her diary. This is the first we've heard of such a document – typically, it's introduced to make a single point without being integrated into the whole. White might have done better to write the novel in the diary form, giving the narrative more immediacy than the conventional past tense she has used. But then again, there are so many things wrong with this novel that I'm not sure that any merely technical alteration could save it.