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This is the author's radio script of this article.

*The Marriage Club*. Kate Legge. Penguin Viking, 2009.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 16 May 2009.

Five women meet in a Melbourne mansion to discuss Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*. All in their fifties, all with marriages lasting decades – marriages in various states of repair, from the happily committed to the recently ended –, their discussion of the book cannot help but carry a subtext from their own lives. But before the night is over one of them will be dead and nothing will ever be the same again.

This is the basic premise of Kate Legge's second novel, *The Marriage Club*. The one happy marriage is between Bernadette, a Catholic do-gooder and Monty, a handyman – a stroke of luck, really, because Bernadette's religious sensibilities wouldn't allow her a divorce. At the other end of the spectrum we have the pathetically alcoholic Rosie, who has been recently dumped by her husband for another woman. In the middle are Eva and Vince, both career-minded and neglectful of each other, and Philip, who still loves his wife Marion, though she's grown sick of him and is carrying on a frenzied liaison by SMS. And then there's Leith with her husband George, a family court judge, who married her to distract himself from his lust for her brother Cameron and has maintained a sexless, window-dressing union with her for many years since dutifully providing her with a couple of sons.

George has become addicted to golf, and the lethal incident which befalls Leith (an odd name – is that a deliberate pun, I wonder?) involves a golf club (another pun – golf club, book club, marriage club). Is it murder, manslaughter, or an accident? We sort of find out at the end, but only after a whole novel's worth of speculation by all the characters, the press and the general public. But it's not a whodunit. There's a police investigation but it's not what the book's about, so there's no pressing mechanical reason for withholding this information to the end, apart from Legge's need to keep us reading. We are privy to George's thoughts throughout the novel, and the revelation doesn't come to one of the other characters. It's just presented at the end in third-person narrative, as if to say, 'there you are, this is what they've all been puzzling over for the last 200 pages.' Well, OK, but I'm tempted to feel slightly put out: it feels like bad faith on the author's part.

There are the four friends and the odd relative to find out about the Leith's death, and we get to witness their shock and distress one by one as the news passes

along: the narrative keeps reeling back to cover the same ground, so the novel has a static feel about it. The continuity sometimes seems a little out: if it's the early hours in Melbourne, wouldn't it be late morning in Boston, rather than the middle of the night? There's also a rather pointless sub-plot about a young dad fighting an access battle for his daughter – all very touching, but so what?

And Legge's prose is nothing to write home about. It's overblown, with sentences dragging on way past their useful lifespan. I was constantly startled by her word choices. Some of them are probably attempts at the evocative and surprising, but many of them plain wrong: 'a team of investigators poured (p-o-u-r-e-d) over his room'; the 'hare and the turtle' – not the same as a tortoise; and one of George's opera-loving colleagues 'humming a libretto' – no, the libretto's the words, the bit you can't hum. One or two of these would be forgivable, but there are countless examples. Sometimes it feels as though her imagery is trying to take flight but only managing an ungainly belly flop. And circumstantial scene-setting is fine, but too much gets in the way and there's far too much.

So despite a certain subtlety and perspicuity about relationships, *The Marriage Club* is tedious and tiresome, the only reason for reading to the end an irritable wish to see the mystery solved, just to be presented with that rather unsatisfactory ending. I'm afraid my suggestion is that you don't bother.