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

Chloe Hooper, *The Engagement* (Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2012)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 1 December 2012.

A real estate agent, bored with her job, seduces a man in the house she is showing him, and then acquiesces when he offers to pay her. This sets the pattern for a perilous and confounding train of events in Chloe Hooper's new novel, *The Engagement*.

Alexander Colquhoun is a Victorian cattle farmer; Liese Campbell is an English interior architect, out of work because of the GFC and visiting her uncle in Melbourne. She is dangerously detached:

The whole point of this country was that nothing particularly mattered. Compared to London the streets of Melbourne seemed almost casually occupied. There was a lack of critical mass. There was a lack of critical anything. (16)

After several months of impersonating a high-class hooker impersonating a property agent, addicted to the money Alexander is shelling out, Liese accepts his invitation to spend a ridiculously well-paid weekend at his property. His house is a huge, rambling, isolated, 19<sup>th</sup>-century pile, and no one else is there.

Hooper plays brilliantly with the conventions of the Gothic. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Liese is spooked by the house and by her host's behaviour. There are mysterious anonymous letters, doors which appear locked, behaviour that appears threatening. But unlike Austen's lighthearted parody, in *The Engagement* it's never quite clear whether her suspicions are unfounded. Liese is a sophisticated, metropolitan woman, but she never succeeds in fathoming Alexander. He puts her in a girlish bedroom with a single bed and resists her sexual advances. He declares his love for her despite her fictitious erring ways, which are bewilderingly corroborated by the serious of obscene anonymous letters he produces. He does not so much propose to her as announce that they will be married. She cannot read him: 'I needed to taste our game behind what now felt like reality. Nothing in his manner told me he was playing' (77). If it is still a game, she no longer knows the rules: 'Sex had been our breathing line and without it we were down too deep and dangerous' (102). She has come to realise the problem with her disassociated state: 'I'd been subsumed in my role and this had been a kind of idiocy, leaving me deaf and blind to the clues my client handed out' (52).

*The Engagement* is almost anti-erotic: sex is a means to an end, or something to bargain with. There is nothing enticing about marriage: in Liese's home town in Norwich, 'people paired off as if they had prior warning of a flood' (111) and she has no desire to do likewise. This taut psychological novel is a thriller in the best sense: no formula is invoked without being undermined, in elegant and mordant prose. Hooper sustains the tension and suspense to the very last page – and perhaps beyond.