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Andrew O'Connor. *Tuvalu*. (Allen & Unwin, 2006).

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, Recorded 6 October 2006.

Tuvalu is a tiny Pacific island nation, and it doesn't appear in Andrew O'Connor's novel *Tuvalu* except as a concept: the idea of a perfect but unreachable place.

At twenty, Noah Tuttle has tried to escape his unhappy home life and unsatisfactory academic career in Australia by moving to Tokyo. But his existence there is dreary: he lives in a run-down hostel with other expatriates and has made few friends among the Japanese: even though he teaches English, the job is designed in such a way that he never gets to know his students. He is perennially depressed and dislikes Japan, himself and his few friends – apart from his girlfriend Tilly who has temporarily returned to Australia.

A spoilt rich Japanese girl named Mami takes an interest in him, and although he is ambivalent about her his girlfriend Tilly takes exception on her return to Tokyo and freezes him out. Noah eventually drifts into crime, terrified always about the possible consequences but drawn in by the only two male friends he has in Japan. He is also attracted by the idea of rejecting his father's alien, self-righteous morality.

The world of *Tuvalu* is drab, whether in Japan or Australia, where Noah returns to see his recently separated parents. Tilly tries to explain the concept of Tuvalu to him: 'Everyone has a place like that. A dream land or life they're working towards, however vaguely.' But Tilly realises it's not real: 'In order to keep Tuvalu I have to keep away from it ... I'll be me anywhere.' Noah doesn't get it then, and it's not clear that he completely gets it by the end of the book.

Tuvalu is an odd book. Noah, as first-person narrator, is morbidly self-critical and not over-perceptive, and fails in just about every significant relationship, the one exception perhaps being his developing friendship with his mother and her part-Japanese lover Celeste. Nevertheless, the writing is accomplished and occasionally brilliant, and the characters, while strange, are more than quirky, each with a very particular individuality. At the same time absorbing and cheerless, *Tuvalu* is a deserving winner of the Australian/Vogel prize.