

Andrea Mayes. *The Rose Notes*. Penguin, 2005.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

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*The Rose Notes* is an impressive first novel by Andrea Mayes, set in the Southern Riverina of New South Wales, on a farm which is a battleground between the mischievous, maddening Dobie Kinnear and his daughter Pearl, nearing fifty, frustrated, unmarried, and tired of keeping house for her father.

There is no rural drama of drought, fire or flood in *The Rose Notes*. The Kinnears are reasonably well off. Pearl is able to pursue her hobby of rose-growing, Dobie can spend time fishing, while the farm is run by their capable manager Pete. The drama of the novel arises from Dobie's failing health, Pearl's increasing desperation, and their chronic inability to communicate with each other. Blundering into this situation is Thomas Hearne, sent on a mission by his late father Henry, bearing a cryptic message for Pearl's long-dead mother Alice.

There is comedy in Thomas' ill-timed efforts to contact the Kinnears, always arriving at a time of family crisis when he can't get their attention. In fact, much of the novel's page-turning quality comes from postponements like this. Dobie and Pearl both put off telling each other important information until it's too late, causing havoc and heartbreak both to each other and to Pete and his wife Bel, the touchstone of harmonious family relations in this comic romance of families, secrets and errors.

When I call the novel a romance, that is not to say that it is a conventional love story. There are romances in the distant past, and others may be in the wind, but the action of the novel concerns unfinished business from the past and new beginnings. It is like a Shakespearean romance, with its heightened reality – its shortish time span – and its sense of things out of joint being set to rights at the end. And there are a couple of slightly odd characters who have a knack of appearing as if by magic just when they're needed.

The narrator maintains a strong presence. The reader is often addressed directly, in the good old nineteenth century manner. 'Look at him, sitting on the steep clay bank with one rod pressed against his knee and another set further along, propped against tree roots. Dobie Kinnear, in his dull green shirt and brown trousers with an old Akubra low on his head, drowsing, as carp break the water surface with insatiable yellow mouths and thousands of insects dance unaware in the air above them. There's

little enough here to betray his place on the mazy trail of human life, or to show what he's gained, and what he's lost. He's just a man fishing, touched by the only god he needs.'

Sometimes the characters are addressed as well. 'Were you close to your mother?,' Thomas is asked. 'Yes I was.' He answers. Then the narrator takes over. 'You were her knight, Thomas. You went into battle for her again and again, with dragons, with giants. But it didn't do any good, did it?' The tone is sympathetic but ironic, sometimes scolding, sometimes admonishing, sometimes pitying the characters for their blindness to what is to come. But it is rarely sentimental. The only time Mayes loses her ironic distance is with the character of Bel, exemplary wife and mother and, tellingly, the only aboriginal character in the book.

The plot of *The Rose Notes* is a little thin and depends a lot on delays and small suspenses which could be seen as transparent. And the big secret revealed at the end is not exactly unpredictable. The pleasure of the book comes from the confident, idiosyncratic narrative voice, well attuned to each of the characters: their inner voices are much more natural, in fact, than their dialogue. Dobie's old age is a melange of memories, cunning and frustration – and both Pearl and Thomas find the challenge of their middle years can be met with a renewed sense of purpose and a little help from some new friends.