

Cath Kenneally: *Jetty Road*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2009. 378 pp. \$ 24.95. ISBN 987-1-86254-829-9. **By Beate Josephi,** Edith Cowan University.

'Not that. Domestic interiors. Drawing rooms. Private lives. Feminine concerns, ... The small canvas stuff; hothouse emotions...' Those are the books that nurse Desirée, called Des, likes to relax with, as she explains to her superior, Matron Paula Haggerty. Paula, unlike Des or her sister Evie not much of a reader, promises to give them a try.

Though the interiors aren't very domestic and the houses don't exactly contain drawing rooms, Cath Kenneally's second novel, *Jetty Road*, is in many ways about private lives, emotions and small canvas stuff. Family in its various forms, siblings, children, nieces, nephews, parents that have passed away, are the web that shapes the lives of Paula and Evie. Set over a period of several months in the last years of the first decade of the 21st century the novel has, apart from family, a second bedrock: the city of Adelaide.

Evie is the oldest, as was not unusual for a good Catholic Irish family, of four other sisters and a couple of brothers. Single, in her mid forties, she still cuts an attractive figure. Mostly clad with clothes from op-shops, which is as much as she can afford, there is an air of eternal hippy-dom about her. Having come back from years of living in Melbourne, nothing is really fixed in her life. Evie takes frequent walks in her neighbourhood to assure herself of all the places she knows, and in some ways belongs to. This, and the anchor of a large family are enough to dispel any feeling of aimless drifting. Evie now works in a crèche in North Adelaide, where she travels by bus or tram from her Glenelg beach suburb (hence the title, *Jetty Road*).

Nearby lives her youngest sister, Paula, just about to turn forty, single mother of Bert, a sometime uni student, and little Rosie. Paula runs a small nursing home, Holmwood. The job, which is a large part of her life, steadies her. However chaotic her home life with the children, most mornings she manages to transform herself into the calm

and collected matron who can deal with the trials and tribulations the Holmwood residents, many of them in various stages of dementia, present her with.

Kenneally successfully draws two sisters of very different temperaments. Evie has managed to put drugs and abusive men behind her, and pens the occasional chapter in her erotic novel set on a Greek island, which closely mirrors her own new relationship. Her life has equipped her well to be an agony aunt and, what is more, to be the trusted aunt of the next generation of Haggertys.

Paula lacks her sister's soft edges, her creative flights. To her, a nonsense person, administration and responsibility at work comes more easily than sensing her son's problems or relaxing with a new male friend, especially as the love for the father of her children has never quite abated.

There's much about children in the book: Paula's children, the children at the crèche Eve works at. There is almost too much about children. But this may just be part of the big Irish Catholic family syndrome. Kenneally has a good ear for the way young adults talk. But their predictable banter, studded with words that only their own close-knit group understands, can at times get a touch tedious, and exclude the reader rather than draw her in.

But this is a small quibble about a book which amazes with the joy to be found in small things. This can be an old jug found in an op shop, "a spotty yellow, jug, murky yellow, with white thumbprints. The squat curve, the sturdy handle, the milky glaze, were all perfect ...". In her facility for detailed description, Kenneally is reminiscent of another Adelaide writer, the late Barbara Hanrahan. But Kenneally's characters, unlike Hanrahan's, do not turn Adelaide into a gothic threat. Evie in particular is capable of a contentment and pleasure which is all the more amazing given that she, in her own words, has very little to show for her forty-five years. Yet all the same, she can be "incessantly amazed and pleased that the next minute, and the next, continued to present themselves."

Adelaide, too, is part of this pleasure:

Humidity sat over the suburb, in the wake of the first rain of summer the day before, sweeping down from the Hills over the city, soothing jangled nerves and sending hordes of homeowners out when evening fell into their parched yards to look for signs of recovery. In the Hills, there'd likely be some pearly vapour in the morning – or perhaps it needed to get a bit colder ... that magical soft mist you could move through as through a thin sea, wrapped up in a few light layers so the outer one or two trapped the moisture, an Adelaide miracle.

Is there a plot to this novel? Not exactly. Everyday life is full enough to keep Paula and Evie busy, and the novel moves quickly from one scene to another. There are plenty of crises, in the immediate family or at work, get-togethers with other members of the family, flashbacks to the more horrid or happy moments of the past, and new men. There are no driving ambitions to fulfil except to get safely from one day to the next, and there is a distinct sense of gratitude when this can be achieved. In this, Keneally's spirited novel shows that life goes on, even after turning forty.