



NEW AUSTRALIAN FICTION: ED WRIGHT

FOR a nation with a fairly short history, it's remarkable how much of our literature is backward looking. As such it's always good to encounter strong novels that engage with contemporary Australian life. *The Mothers' Group* (Allen & Unwin, 320pp, \$29.99) by Fiona Higgins, whose previous book, *Love in the Age of Drought*, was a memoir about a city girl marrying a Queensland farmer, is fresh and compelling. Based on a group of new mothers who meet on the northern beaches of Sydney, it has that capacity that good social novels should have of creating meaning and intensity from what on the surface may appear ordinary.

The story begins from the point of view of Ginie, a very recognisable Sydney figure, a lawyer in her late 30s who is obsessed with work and ambivalent about motherhood even as she becomes one. She is a sharply rendered, somewhat arrogant character, but just as you think the book may be becoming another exercise in upper middle class narcissism in a market already well served by them, *The Mothers' Group* takes a fine turn that undercuts Ginie and creates a sense of life's tantalising yet worrying broadness.

In doing so, it becomes a testament to the uniqueness of individuals even in a place with a reputation as an insular peninsula. The switch from Ginie's point of view is analogous to emerging from a tunnel into the sunlight. It's not an easy thing to pull off in a fiction, but Higgins does it here superbly, even if we are not allowed to remain in the sunlight for long.

Higgins's great skill is most evident in the

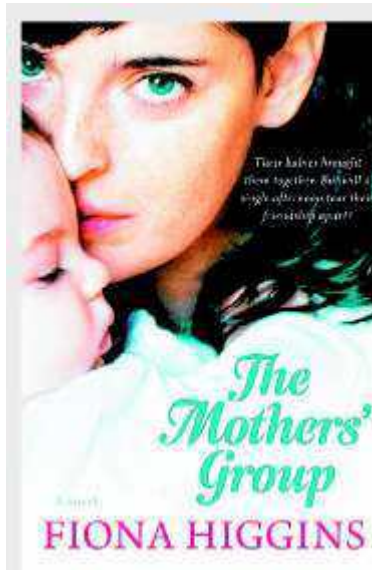
juxtaposition of her characters. In addition to Ginie, there's Suzie, a single mum with alternative ideas, whose partner left her for a hippie commune when she was seven months' pregnant; Miranda, an ex-art gallery manager married to a controlling financier; Made, a young Balinese woman married to an older Australian husband; Pippa, a psychologist who's married to her high school sweetheart; and Cara, like Miranda an emigre from inner Sydney who works in publishing and is married to an accountant. Higgins writes convincingly from all their points of view, and the way each character's point of view redefines the reader's perceptions of the other characters is fantastic. I was surprised by the way my sympathies were shaped and reshaped as the story progressed towards its heartbreaking climax.

The prose is sharp, the characterisation even sharper. It's almost a novel

that could have dispensed with the conventions of plot and remained an open-ended exploration of the relationship between these women, thrown together through the happenstance of proximity and pregnancy.

There's a wisdom lurking in this poly-focal structure, too; how people who are different, who don't even really like each other in fact, somehow manage to pull themselves together into a kind of community of mutual aid. Nor do the male partners get short shrift in this book. Some of them are appalling, others touching, but none of them is a cliché. Higgins looks at the difficult moment of becoming parents with an unflinching but powerful humanity.

Like its Allen & Unwin stablemate, *The*



Slap, The Mothers' Group is a top-shelf novel about contemporary Australian life.

FOR those who like getting out of the country, James Rose, among other things the founder of social justice-minded media company Random Ax, has debuted with *Virus* (Kindle Store; \$3.99), an intriguing big pharma conspiracy novel set in Uganda, Israel, Europe and America. While not in the league of John Le Carre's *A Constant Gardener*, it's still a cleverly wrought plot that straddles the tensions between the expectations of genre and the moral ambivalences of the actual world with aplomb.

Asher Fox has the unusual job of being an ethics detective. Basically this involves digging around companies to find out whether they are as good as they claim to be. He is hired by the charity Save the Innocent to investigate BioHor, a company the charity is planning to partner in a bid to find a cure for AIDs. Of course, things are not what they seem. BioHor becomes aware of Asher digging around and he is contacted by its sexy PR woman, Cal West, who is playing both sides of the fence. And Cal is not the only one.

Asher falls for Cal and gets drawn into a conspiracy that grows bigger by the minute. There are batches of punctured condoms, corporate skulduggery and, as the action heats up, guns, double-crossings and an American president with an unusual problem to deal with. The characters are a bit clunky but the plot zips along between its exotic locations.

EXPERIENCED television writer Chris McCourt has written for popular shows such as *McLeod's Daughters* and *All Saints*. Her

debut novel is *The Cleansing of Mahommed* (Fourth Estate, 384pp, \$24.95), a thwarted romance, based on a true story, set in Broken Hill on the cusp of World War I.

Young Afghan Gool Mahommed arrives in Broken Hill an innocent abroad obsessed by soap, and determined to make a go of himself by making a fortune in the mines. Yet his attempts to better himself along the imperial model of self-Anglicisation meet with resistance from those around him.

Only Alice, local nurse and orphaned sister of Lewis and Eileen, is sympathetic to his cause. He makes her heart flutter and gets her thinking about an escape from her mundane existence.

Such liaisons of course are socially taboo and this one is particularly fraught, given her other admirer is Keith, a local policeman. Things go pear-shaped, but the ending is not what you would expect.

It is tempting to read *The Cleansing of Mahommed* at least partly as an allegory for the vein of Islamophobia that peaked in the West after September 11. Yet it also reminds us, as Australians, how much more tolerant and inclusive a society we have become in comparison to the rancid and rigid racisms that ruled here a century ago.

McCourt handles her characters well. The foolish Irma and her fiancé, the dope-addled sanitary inspector Robert, as well as the shifty herbalist Adrian Kardan provoke the reader's misanthropic instincts, while the frustrations of the protagonists are easy to identify with. A stronger evocation of the visual environment might have enhanced the story, a sign perhaps of someone who's used to the camera telling this part of the story, but there's plenty here to enjoy.

