

Sophie Cunningham. *Geography*. Text Publishing, 2004.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

Broadcast on 26 July 2004

Sophie Cunningham's novel *Geography* is a story of obsession. Catherine, the first person narrator, is in love with Michael, an Australian academic living in California. Their passionate affair straddling the Pacific Ocean lasts many years.

Michael is an attractive older man with a strong and urgent sex drive. Catherine seems totally driven by her own sexual urges. So far this makes sense. But I never felt drawn in by the narrative. Instead, I argued. If she is so mad about him, what's to stop her moving to the US? She lives in Melbourne with a couple and their baby, and although they're like family that's not enough to keep her there. She moves to Sydney, to another advertising job. Why not move to LA instead? Nearly at the end of the book she tells Michael that "I have offered again and again to come to Los Angeles and you have never told me why you didn't want me to come." If she made that clear earlier in the book the story would make more sense.

*Geography* starts with a huge cliché. Catherine is in Sri Lanka with her new friend Ruby, after the end of the affair with Michael, and the women are on a beach watching a giant turtle lay her eggs. Catherine's advertising career obviously gives her a heightened sense of the iconic image which catches the common imagination. It also gives her a fund of facile advertising jargon. A friend gives her a 'richly illustrated' book – surely a phrase which belongs on the outside of a book, not on the inside. There are frequent lapses into enthusiastic travelogue. "The mildness of Sydney's weather meant you didn't

have to put on a wetsuit, like you did when you kayaked in Victoria,” she informs us. And Bondi ‘was a place where informality had been ritualised.’ Presumably the travel clichés are intentional, given the stated theme of the book – Geography and its place in Catherine’s love life. But there is nothing clever about the imagery, nothing that illuminates the dreary tale of this woman’s inexplicable crush on this one very fallible man. Her friend Ruby puts the reader’s misgivings into words: ‘I want to understand this great love of yours, but frankly, even with all the exotic backdrops, I’m stumped.’ Catherine replies by likening her attachment to drug addiction, and when Ruby is still not convinced, says, ‘I can just tell you the facts, I can only tell you what happened.’

So *Geography*, for all its artful attempt to interweave the story of the affair with Michael with her journey through Sri Lanka and India with Ruby, doesn’t hang together as a novel. Even the details are often confusing – the sequence of events can be difficult to follow, and there is no beauty or transcendence to counteract the irritation the reader feels at having to re-read pages in an attempt to work out where and when this is all happening. It’s an ambitious book, Cunningham has failed to create a narrative that is either effective or engaging.