This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Sylvia Johnson’s new novel *Watch Out For Me* is a stylish thriller. It links various events in Australia to the murder of Jean Charles de Menezes by police in the London Underground in July 2005 when they suspected him of being a terrorist. The links are not immediately evident: quotations from articles in the *Guardian* interspersed in the narrative follow the developments in the news story, as it was discovered that Menenez was not an Islamic terrorist but a Brazilian electrician minding his own business. The plot link is perhaps indirect, but the thematic link is strong: the devastating consequences of making assumptions on the basis of appearances.

In 1967, when his mother is ill, eight-year-old Toby Woods goes to stay with his three cousins and their parents at their beach house at Bradley’s Head on Sydney Harbour. The timid child is accepted into the family at first but then, in the way of childhood dynamics, a day comes when fissures appear and the golden summer is over. Forty years later, these four children reappear and events play out to a devastating conclusion in a climate where terrorism has caused jumpy officials to suspend the usual rule of law.

The plot itself is not particularly complicated, but it’s told in short bursts, each focalised through one of the characters – Hannah, the eldest child, Lizzie, her sister and their cousin Toby, along with a couple of other residents of Bradley’s Head. Hannah’s is the most entertaining of these voices: ‘Thirteen. Oh, we were so bad and bright at thirteen, so full of secrets and sin, so roiling, so fizzing with life that we couldn’t contain it’, she says. The trope of dark alleyways and tunnels appears in each section of the narrative, though looking back on the novel it becomes clear that Lizzie’s story is a little removed: she is not in Sydney but caught up in anti-Western riots in Morocco, and though her predicament adds to the tension, it isn’t really connected to the Sydney plot which involves the other three.

I began to wonder whether there was an intentional reference to the Wizard of Oz, with one of the children, Lizzie, believing she lacks courage, one – Hannah – lacking a heart and Toby, perhaps, feeling less intelligent than the others. This might be a long bow to draw, but it’s that sort of book, full of symbols and echoes and intricate patterns inviting interpretation rather than involvement. The chapters are very short: few even reach the fourth page, which has the effect of never allowing more than the most superficial identification with any character. There are some voices, such as the detestable Mrs Monckton, with her caricature of self-righteous racism, which feel downright manipulative. And this might be its greatest weakness. It’s clever and well-written, but in the end *Watch Out for Me* feels rather slick, more like a machine for creating tension than a work of literature.