Judith Colquhoun, *Thicker than Water* (Black Pepper, 2014)

*Thicker than Water* is veteran Australian scriptwriter Judith Colquhoun’s debut novel, and she draws upon her years of writing, her knowledge of the television industry, and her experiences in Italy to deliver an entertaining narrative. The story begins when Lucy O’Connell’s mother, Kate, is on her deathbed and decides she must, at Lucy’s insistence, reveal the circumstances of her daughter’s conception. Lucy discovers her mother was raped by an Italian boy who subsequently escaped punishment and returned to Italy. Lucy is shocked and angered by the revelation and decides to take revenge. What follows is a journey across the world and a quest for revenge that ultimately turns into Lucy’s *bildungsroman*.

From the moment Lucy touches down in Italy, she begins to doubt her ability to make decisions and cope on her own, and so begins an examination of her inner demons. This facet of the novel is beautifully executed with Lucy’s inner narrative running alongside lush descriptions of Naples and later, the Italian countryside. There is also a rather serendipitous meeting with a young Italian man, who becomes important to Lucy’s future, and there are digressions into cultural mores and traffic rules (or lack thereof) in Italy that will amuse anyone who has visited that country.

*Thicker than Water* started as a telemovie treatment and its origins show at times. Certain scenes seem too much like a ‘scene’, as if the prose is fleshed-out stage direction. However, the strength of the dialogue and Lucy’s dry humour make up for this weakness. My main complaint with this narrative is hinging the plot on a flimsy revenge-urge. I could not believe in Lucy’s plan for revenge. Her mother suffered a terrible start in life at the hands of young man she barely knew, and lived with the contempt of her parents for years without complaint. She did not bring Lucy up to be an angry, vengeful woman. Add Lucy’s current stepfather, Geoff, to the mix; he is a caring man who tries his hardest to be available for his stepdaughter without being judgemental and it seems impossible that Lucy would actually follow through on her vengeful thoughts. Grief can certainly do strange things to a person, but her loving upbringing makes her rather childish and selfish behaviour hard to believe. Lucy could have easily embarked on her journey, and experienced all that happened to her, if in a slightly different order, without the construct of the ‘revenge quest’. I found her repeated attempts to talk herself into an action that she was clearly incapable of seeing through quite tiring. But this is a minor complaint about what is, in the main, an easy to read, enjoyable narrative.

Colquhoun does not make unfair demands on her reader. *Thicker than Water* is a pleasant reminder that reading is supposed to be a lovely escape: in this case to a beautiful country with good-looking, interesting characters and mouth-watering food.

Kathleen Steele