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Peter Rose, editor of *Australian Book Review*, poet, and author of the celebrated family memoir *Rose Boys*, has produced his first novel, *A Case of Knives*. And to everyone’s surprise it is not a slim, poetic volume but a sexy, dramatic family saga of murky intergenerational secrets set among the power elite in contemporary Australia. It is a highly fictional scenario: at the core of the novel is the family of Philip Anthem, a Labor prime minister from the 1970s who bears very little resemblance to Gough Whitlam.

Julia Collis is a publisher in her very late forties. Unconventional, sexually rapacious, manipulative towards her closest connections, and ruthless towards those who threaten her world, she strides through life with a self-assurance which bamboozles just about everyone she deals with. She is a compulsive mother, though she has only one child of her own, Candy, a young opera singer on the brink of a brilliant career. Julia has no interest in the disciplined joys of shared parenthood: Candy has never been told who her father is, and is apparently happy not to know.

Julia is one of the first-person narrators of *A Case of Knives*. The other is twenty-eight year old Matthew Light, the son of her old friend Babs, whom she adopted – more or less formally – when he was twelve, taking him to live in her somewhat gothic Melbourne house, Valhalla. Their narratives alternate, slowly revealing some, though not all, secrets of the past and present, and charting the process of Matthew’s belated emergence from under Julia’s shadowy wing and his unhappy involvement with the enigmatic Roman, Philip Anthem’s grandson.
Both Matthew and Julia write dated entries as if in a journal, but the story they tell is for the most part retrospective. Each recalls events from the year before, in a steady, chronological format which is strangely co-ordinated despite the characters’ estrangement from each other. As characters, Matthew and Julia are poles apart, but this is not reflected in their narrative techniques. And often the retrospective narration seems to have little point. Sometimes there is something happening in the narrative present to link it with the narrated past, but why head a chapter with a diary date if there is nothing in it apart from a straightforward account of what happened some time last year?

I’m not sure how seriously Peter Rose wants us to take this novel. Less care has been taken with the editing than one would normally expect from someone of his experience in publishing. Nevertheless, this background has provided a setting he satirises with obvious relish, along with other institutions like politics, the media, the theatre world, and the AFL. And despite a few technical faults, A Case of Knives is engrossing and entertaining with some sharply drawn characters. Though more finely written, it could take its place alongside popular melodramatic blockbusters in the airport newsagent.