This is the author’s script for this broadcast.


*Summer at Mount Hope* is Rosalie Ham’s second novel. Mount Hope is a vineyard near a bay between Melbourne and Geelong, and the year is 1894. Phoebla Crupp lives on the vineyard with her parents and sister Lilith. Her best friends Hadley and Henrietta live with their mother on a small struggling sheep farm nearby, and both properties adjoin a large station owned by the squattocratic Overton family. Drought and depression are making life difficult for everyone.

There are so many echoes of *Pride and Prejudice* in this novel that it’s hard to believe they’re not deliberate. Phoebla is a spirited girl like Elizabeth Bennet. She has mismatched parents – a sardonic father with a soft spot for his eldest daughter, and a mother prone to hysterics and keen to marry off her daughters. Her sister is a vapid flirt who does nothing around the house. She has a plain, unmarriageable friend in Henrietta, and there is a single man apparently in possession of a good fortune conveniently located at Overton station. The plot is firmly grounded, like all Jane Austen’s plots, in questions of money, marriage and inheritance. And most of all, threaded through the narrative is the subdued humorous irony of everyday life.

However, *Summer at Mount Hope* is not just a pale imitation of a classic novel. Phoebla is not Elizabeth Bennet, and the plot unravels differently: two hundred years later, Austen’s fairy-tale endings are somehow not possible. And throughout the novel there is a feeling of threat, from the underclass of desperate itinerant labourers looking for scanty work, and from the unpredictable weather which could ruin everything in a day for these families, very different from the security of Jane
Austen’s world. Newspaper headlines punctuate the narrative as a reminder of a world outside the novel’s pages.

Ham has handled the difficulties of writing an historical novel with considerable flair. There are anachronisms, but the pace and flow of rural life in 1894 feels genuine. The problem of authentic dialogue has been simply avoided. The characters speak in natural modern language without too many attempted nineteenth-century affectations or misplaced twenty-first century colloquialisms. The narrative style is forthright and vivacious with exuberant images that occasionally made me laugh out loud with delight, though at other times they left me confused.

One criticism I have of *Summer at Mount Hope* is that the business of the narrative is often not handled well. Large awkward objects sometimes disappear during a whole scene only to reappear when convenient, and I couldn’t make sense of the time scale of the epilogue at all. Nevertheless, it is an engaging novel with likeable and plausible characters living in a world created with intelligence, imagination, humour and verve.