

A young Western Australian woman is in Paris to write a book about modernity – the poetics of ‘electrics, mechanics, communication, transportation’, all the things people take to so quickly with barely a backward glance. There is a spurned former Australian boyfriend who might cause trouble, but the friendship at the centre of this novel is more interesting and unexpected. Alice meets Mr Sakamoto, a survivor of the bombing of Nagasaki, similarly enthralled by the ethereal wonders of the present day, who is writing a biography of Alexander Graham Bell.

*Dreams of Speaking* is a poetic and contemplative novel, full of ideas and images rather than events. Mr Sakamoto’s emails punctuate the narrative, each telling in precise, old-fashioned but elegant prose the story of an invention and its inventor. Alice’s childhood, her stormy relationship with her younger sister and her alienation from her mother, the student love affair – all are evoked with economy, although there are some slight glitches in continuity here and there: Chapter 9 in particular has some broken wires as if it were dumped into the novel without being properly fitted. But all the characters are appealing and three-dimensional, and *Dreams of Speaking* is an absorbing and intelligent book.