

*Provenance* is an engaging romance set in the early 1960s. An adventurous nineteen-year-old girl, Rafaela, escapes from her repressive Italian-Australian family in country Queensland, heading for art school in Melbourne. On the train south she meets Chanchal, a Punjabi Sikh who has been cutting cane during the holidays and is on his way back to Melbourne to continue his postgraduate studies in biochemistry.

Despite its multicultural trappings, *Provenance* is an old-fashioned love story, with a plot hinging on family opposition, lost correspondence, chance meetings and misunderstandings. Rafaela and Chanchal are appealing and sexy lovers, but the plot requires them to be alternately impulsive and gormless, which is sometimes irritating. The ethnic aspect turns on itself, to an extent, as well. Though Rafi and Chanchal appreciate and enjoy – deeply – their differences, the families are so violently racist and repressive towards their children that all the old stereotypes are in danger of being reinforced.

Messer writes well, ably evoking the landscape and weather and city life. But the fineness of the writing is wasted for the second half of the book, when the plot takes hold with a vice-like grip and hurries the reader on to the inevitable, satisfying conclusion.