After the delicious dark fable of *The Last Love Story*, Rodney Hall has taken a step back towards magical realism with his new novel, *Love Without Hope*. It’s set in the 1980s when there was still a Department of Lunacy in New South Wales – until it lost its bizarre and colourful name and was subsumed into the Department of Health. The Master of Lunacy, later the Superintendent, is in charge of the mental hospital which dispenses care indistinguishable from sadism to one Lorna Shoddy, elderly horse breeder and deserted wife, who has been committed by machinations among her neighbours the details of which gradually become clear, if not to her, at least to the reader and various other characters.

Hall’s most remarkable achievement in this book is the astonishingly imaginative creation of the subjective world of Mrs Shoddy, the massive humiliations and frustrations of her situation, alleviated only by the tiniest scraps of hope. Mrs Shoddy isn’t your typical CWA farm woman: she has read Nietzsche and her favourite poem, quoted in the book’s title, is by Robert Graves; and she suspects that her harmless eccentricity is what has made people persecute her. Bound in a straitjacket, locked in an empty concrete cell, she retreats from her body into her mind:

She is not insane.

She understands that she has been betrayed and judged, she has been the victim of contempt – contempt so unimaginably virulent they’ll do this to her rather than tolerate letting her live on in her own way, minding her business and troubling no one. She understands that the cowardice of her
persecutors is so craven they haven’t the grace to kill her outright nor the intelligence to doubt their own grounds for belief. For an hour or two she dwells on their poverty of spirit. How strangled the imagination would need to have become not to recognise the brutality, nor recognise the monumental vulgarity of what they are doing to her. …

She feels better already.

Most of the other characters are more or less burlesque figures: there is the cruel and self-satisfied male nurse, Vernon, and the domineering town matriarch, and the crooked real estate agent. The point of view moves around between several characters: we witness the Master of Lunacy’s discomfiture at the reforms decreed by the Department, for example: ‘These decisions – made by politicians with no practical experience of the patients’ needs, let alone the consequences of such measures – are plainly ideological. Naturally, he voiced his unease. But no one paid the least attention. Now all he can do is accept the bitter fact.’ The irony is heavy: the reforms would abolish many of the methods used to torment Mrs Shoddy.

After all the horrors, the climax is a noisy baroque set piece of violence and vindication. Love Without Hope doesn’t quite have the spellbinding quality of The Last Love Story but it is still a wonderful book, comic, absorbing and intriguing.