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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
In her second novel, Andrea Mayes has once again used the arrival of a stranger in a small Australian community to drive her plot. Her first novel, *The Rose Notes*, was set in the Riverina, while *Shearwater* is set in a (fictional) coastal town of that name on Victoria’s Great Ocean Road, a place of fierce winds and dangerous family secrets, where immense flocks of mutton birds, or shearwaters, fill the twilight skies at certain times of the year.

Cassie has left her husband of twenty-eight years upon discovering that she has been displaced by a younger woman. With nowhere to go – her only surviving child has fled to America – she finds her way to Shearwater and rents a cottage near the river marshes. Desperate with grief, she tries to avoid the curiosity of the townspeople, but is gradually drawn into village life and finds that life is possible without Richard after all.

Mayes doesn’t rely on tightly plotted drama in *Shearwater* any more than she did in *The Rose Notes*. There are mysteries but the revelations at the end bring few surprises: an astute reader would already have guessed most of them. But where her characters are concerned, her ear is acute. We can see from the beginning how appallingly comic Cassie’s husband Richard is, although she is away from him for some weeks before she can hear how ridiculous he is, complaining to her about his new woman’s demands: “‘She wants to sell the house. … I can’t let this happen. This house has always been a haven for me, you know that.’ The man has absolutely no sense of irony,’ she thinks to herself drily.
Mayes’ art is not startlingly original. Many of her characters are to be found in country-town novels everywhere: the eccentric elderly woman living alone in a large house, the sinister loner, the busybody from the post office. But she goes deeper with four or five people, showing the individual inside the stock figure. In fact, Cassie herself has suffered from typecasting, as the downtrodden, disregarded corporate wife, and Shearwater shows her that this is not her destiny but a straightjacket best discarded.

The descriptions of landscape and weather are precise and evocative, the dialogue natural, the action organic and evolving rather than mechanical. *Shearwater* is a satisfying, engaging novel, thoughtful without being pretentious, funny without being satirical, and warm without being sentimental.