This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Mangowak is a fictional town on Victoria’s south coast, and has featured in three novels by Gregory Day. The latest is *The Grand Hotel*, narrated by artist Noel Lea, a local man of indeterminate age, disciple of the Dada movement, who is convinced by his friends, upon the demolition of the local hotel to make way for a ‘cluster of eco-apartments’, to turn his ancestral home into a pub.

Much is made of the fact that this is no ordinary pub. It serves alcoholic drinks, of course, and offers live music and accommodation, but the urinal is wired to play an absurdist voice track, freshly recorded each day, whenever it’s used. Examples are ‘The index of local irritation by tourism’, and ‘Drunken seals’. At happy hour, Noel likes to stream Vatican Radio via YouTube, which reliably delights the locals but alienates any passing travellers who are unwise enough to drop in for a drink. When a couple visits who are ‘well heeled, but not exactly aristocratic, well mannered, but not exactly cultured, the kind of neatly dressed baby boomers who might these days be subscribers to the opera in town’ (246), they are mercilessly though unknowingly mocked and driven away by the contemptuous wit of Noel and his friends.

For some reason which is never absolutely clear, an indie singer named The Blonde Maria, and a crass lothario who happens to have a magnificent gift for singing opera, which he will only exercise in his bedroom each morning, take up residence in the hotel. Maria sings with the band until she hears Louis, The Lazy Tenor, singing Verdi. Lovestruck and humbled, she refuses to sing again. ‘I know now, for the first time, what music is. What it really is.’ (164) Noel tries to talk her out of it, but he knows it’s a ‘lie’. The fact that Maria is a talented pub entertainer, and Louis only sings operatic arias in his bedroom, means nothing. There is an scale of musical virtue: Louis, with his somehow ‘natural’ talent for opera, is the pinnacle, Maria, with her earthy, enjoyable vocals is somewhere way down on a lower plane.

The implied aesthetics of this are complete nonsense, but this is just one of the many irritations in this long novel. There is an extended subplot dealing with the history of the first Grand Hotel, which burnt down 100 years earlier. Kooka, the town’s local history nut (every town has one), retires to his bed upstairs in the hotel and, as Maria discovers, his dreams of last days of the old Grand are mysteriously picked up by an old transistor radio on his bedside table. OK, this is a dada novel, we have to suspend disbelief, but these dream sequences are too long and laboured. Meanwhile, various events are planned but turn to chaos, sabotaged by officious council authorities or the irrational behaviour of overwrought barmen. The council installs three plinths in the river, with each equipped with a large bronze bell, to celebrate the Year of the Maritime. This is a constant source of annoyance to the locals, and a symbol of official stupidity, but it’s hard to see why they are in essence any more annoying than a talking urinal. And then there are the nicknames. Just about everyone (except Noel and his family) has a nickname – Kooka, Givva Way, The Lazy Tenor, The Blonde Maria; but it beggars belief that even the wife of a man named Sutherland who’s renamed ‘Joan’ on the pub’s first night would keep calling him that.
These are petty quibbles, but they are symptoms of a larger problem. The Grand Hotel constantly laughs at its own jokes in the most unsubtle ways. You can’t help sympathising with the bemused baby-boomers who are unfortunate enough to stumble into Noel’s work of art thinking it’s a country pub. Near the end of the book we’re told, ‘Before the hotel had begun, none of [the regulars] could ever have expected to have seen what they’d seen, heard what they’d heard, and been exposed to so many unlikely experiences.’ (430) The Grand Hotel doesn’t justify such hyperbole. People drink a great deal, fall in and out of love, undergo a few fairly normal vicissitudes in life, and an unsustainable but amusing attempt to run a business burns itself out. It’s a pleasant enough novel, but it’s too long and too entranced with its own cleverness.