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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Some novels begin happy and calm, which is ominous because things are sure to get a lot worse before they get better, if they ever do. Melina Marchetta’s sequel to *Saving Francesca*, *The Piper’s Son*, is not one of those novels. At the beginning chaos reigns, and the comforting thing is that it’s clear things can only get better: order will be restored, rifts will be healed, and happiness found possible after all. It’s almost as inevitable, and as satisfying, as a detective novel.

Tom Finch MacKee’s world is in tatters following the death of his young uncle Joe in the 2005 London bombings. His parents have split up. His mother and sister have moved north to Brisbane and his father has disappeared. He’s abandoned his friends, and the girl he loves is in East Timor, doing good and sleeping with a Brazilian peacekeeper. After a drug-fuelled accident in a pub, he ends up at his aunt Georgie’s place.

Georgie is in a pickle of her own. She’s pregnant to her estranged boyfriend, though they’re not really speaking and she has never forgiven him for fathering a son with another woman during a separation seven years earlier. She’s still in mourning for her little brother Joe, and missing her twin brother Dominic, Tom’s father. And overshadowing the whole family is the tragedy of their father’s death in Vietnam. His body, like Joe’s in the London underground, wasn’t found. Her mother, Grace, tells her grandson,

> ‘It’s what I’ve been doing for most of my life, Tommy. … Burying the men in my family in empty coffins.’ She’s always said it’s why they have the right to own the world. Because their family’s blood is spattered all over it. Long Khanh, Vietnam. That tube station in London. Different types of wars, someone else’s fight, but it’s the Finches and the MacKees who have paid.

This is pretty dramatic stuff, and Marchetta has no qualms about wringing the utmost emotional impact from the situation. But she does it well. Despite the melodrama, she somehow avoids sentimentality. Her characters are beautifully drawn, all full of quirks and contradictions, their own worst enemies, clever about each other’s lives and dumb about their own. While I was reading this book I happened to find out about the psychological concept of fundamental attribution error, and I realised that this kind of fiction would not exist without it. Everyone misunderstands the behaviour of the people around them, especially those they care for the most. Novels like this are about overcoming these misunderstandings, learning to trust people, and healing family ties and relationships. In *The Piper’s Son*, the way it all works out is as neat and gratifying as a Shakespearean romance. Marchetta draws all the threads together with the humour, warmth and intelligence that made *Looking for Alibrandi* such a success.