This is the author’s radio script of this article.
The University of Western Australia Press has recently ventured into creative writing, and Geraldine Wooller’s second novel *The Seamstress* is one of the first publications in their New Writing series.

The themes of *The Seamstress* are not new: the charting of a daughter’s close relationship with her mother through an unhappy marriage and a protracted final illness. But Wooller imbues her novel with honesty, intelligence and humour.

*The Seamstress* feels very much like a memoir, and it must surely be based on Wooller’s personal experience. Joanna asks her mother, in the last stages of Alzheimer’s, whether she knows her name: ‘For some reason this person reels off a list of names, like a quiz show, “Genevieve, Gwendoline, Georgina, Josephine, Jezebel…” and she’s laughing, this woman. “…all the names I’ve been called!”’, Jo responds. One could see this list of similar names as a clue linking the character Joanna with the writer Geraldine. And then there’s her former lover, referred to simply as ‘A’, as if to conceal her identity: hardly necessary in a novel, especially a novel without an explicit framing narrative to explain such reticence.

Wooller’s narrative is fragmented and sometimes confusing, lacking clues about settings, times and background details. I presume this is intentional, mimicking the way Joanna is feeling her way through life, groping for understanding. Nevertheless, sometimes more details could be sketched in: after all, we are seeing the action through Jo’s eyes and she know perfectly well where she works, what city she lives in, and who it is she meets at her friend’s funeral. And whereas the adult Joanna
speaks in the first person, the third person is used for the child. Usually this is a
device to distance an adult narrator from the immaturity of the child, but in this case
the identification remains the same once the jolt of change of voice is overcome: Jo is
not disowning her younger self’s behaviour or feelings, and Wooller gains little from
the dislocation in the flow of narrative.

These quibbles aside, *The Seamstress* is a moving account of the comedy of
life. How many books relate a child’s anxiety about her parents’ fighting? But Jo’s
version is unusually wry:

God bless Mum and Dad and don’t let him hit her tonight, please God. Let
him come home sober. She reviewed this: If he comes home drunk and hits
her, make her not do anything back, because that makes him worse. So make
her not answer back.

Our Lady might help. … She launched into a favourite, whispering
with rhythmic cadences: ‘Remember oh most gracious Virgin Mary that never
was it known in any age that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy
help or sought thy intercession was left unaided.’ This should do it. (62)

Wooller’s account of this mother-daughter relationship rarely lapses into
sentimentality. Against stereotype, as she notes, Joanna’s is a Scottish family of
Catholics with a propensity for enjoying themselves – any excuse for a party – and
when it comes to drinking, the women are hardly more temperate than the men. In her
last paragraph, Jo says the idea of the book ‘was to be a tribute to Willa’, her mother.
Willa emerges as a brave, funny, joyous and loving woman, able even in her
deteriorating state to share a joke with Jo. The author has dedicated the book to her
own mother. The veneer of fiction is thin, and seems unnecessary for this family with
a few sad stories, but no very terrible secrets.