In *Bookseller and Publisher* last year, there was an article by reviewer Tony Maniaty bemoaning the modern publishing industry: ‘Navel-gazing tomes continue to appear like grey confetti, and often with as much substance. Whatever claims literature has historically to identifying and showing us “the human condition” are negated here by authorial claims of self-fascination. “I have a life, therefore I am inherently interesting” is a lousy starting point for a good read, not to mention a literary career or a stupendous work of art.’\(^1\)

Of course some memoirs do turn out to be good reads or even stupendous works of art, but *This Way to the Sea* is not one of them: it falls squarely into the category of ‘grey confetti’.

Gillian Nicholson is a freelance Sydney journalist who, with her devoted husband Christo, impulsively buys a banana farm on the NSW central coast. In their late fifties, this city couple know nothing about agriculture, let alone banana farming. Such dubiously charming fecklessness seems to invite disaster. However, despite her claim that their future is ‘not looking particularly wonderful, in financial terms’, they somehow manage to buy the farm without descending into bankruptcy even though they don’t actually farm it.

The book is full of anecdotes – problems with water pumps, battles against weeds, walks in the bush, buying a car – but few of these little stories seem to have

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\(^1\) Tony Maniaty, ‘Grey Confetti,’ *Bookseller and Publisher* Summer 2006/07, 33.
much point or even entertainment value. Nicholson is it seems so completely free of malice that everyone she meets becomes a lifelong friend. This is no doubt a sterling quality, but it doesn’t make for great literature. It’s as if a rather ordinary, quite nice person whose trivial chatter one mightn’t mind listening to over morning tea from time to time decided to write down everything she might say in that sort of context and publish it. The philosophising doesn’t get any deeper than statements like ‘Change is inevitable, but this slow world Christo and I now inhabit is rare, unspoiled and it should stay that way;’ ‘Development is an evil word around here,’ she says, ‘and rightly so.’ Her own plans to build tourist cottages and hold weddings on her property are, of course, not really ‘development.’

The sentiment soon cloys, and nausea sets in. The Nicholsons have a perfect marriage and a wonderful daughter, and their friends, pets and extended family are all wonderful too. The neighbours are all ‘pure gold’. Like the economics, which don’t quite add up, the relationships don’t all ring true: one can’t help suspecting that fearless honesty is not this writer’s strongest suit. I felt a shard of truth trying to break through when she’s talking about the possibility of her mother moving to a nearby town: ‘a retirement home is out of the question: … we’re too close,’ she says, but 20 pages later she confesses that ‘Mum and I have had our fair share of tensions. But now I feel there’s a real chance we’ll become friends.’ This is about as soul-baring as it gets, and the book ends with the renewal of the happy couple’s vows, a ceremony insisted upon by her adoring husband.

I really can’t see why a publisher would bother with a book like this. Self-congratulation rarely leads to successful writing, especially when expressed with hardly a trace of self-deprecating wit. But perhaps there’s a market for the
unthreatening and merely pleasant, and all the people Nicholson knows will no doubt enjoy reading about themselves.