

Paydirt is a bitter, violent blast of a novel in four intense stream-of-consciousness word-portraits. Kate (like the author) has fostered a disabled Indigenous boy, Warren, and she is tormented with exasperation, guilt and thwarted love for him. Memories, poems, and fragments of nursery rhymes jostle together as she flies with Warren to Queensland to reunite him with his mother, and to revisit her own parents after many years’ absence.

Warren’s monologue comes next, displaying an inventive and catachrestic mastery of English in his side of a charming, duplicitous conversation with those around him on the plane. Kate’s parents’ ultra-conventional racism emerges as they bicker, united only in disapproval of their lesbian daughter. Then Flo, Warren’s mother, speaks from her hospital bed, equable and generous despite a horrific past and approaching death. The narrative stops short, in each case, of the moment of meeting – it’s all memory and anticipation.

Pastiche is the dominant mode, and although much of the writing is powerful, the insistent repetition of catch phrases becomes tiresome. The bigoted stupidity of the parents (could it be a child’s payback?) is as implausible as Flo’s gentle forgivingness. Paydirt is difficult to like, despite moments of humour and hope.