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This is the author’s radio script of this article.

Review for Writers Radio by Gillian Dooley recorded 1 September 2007.

Nine Parts Water is Emma Hardman’s first novel, set in a surfing town in Queensland among hippies and surfers and environmentalists. Cal is in her mid-thirties, a former surfing champion who grew up in the town with her mother, a woman with a deep identification with the sea but less enthusiasm for motherhood. Cal comes back to the town ‘to sort out her mother’s legacy’ – why now, when her mother has been dead for 16 years, is not clear.

Also converging on the town at about the same time are Greta, an old friend, with her disaffected teenage daughter, Nina; Hassan, an Afghan refugee who has escaped from Woomera; and Cal’s old surfing coach and lover, Mac. Cal, despite her years, is somewhat of an innocent abroad, and has little idea of anything in the way of politics, current affairs, or even normal human relationships. Surfing is her thing, though she hasn’t surfed since her mother’s death. The novel is essentially about her return to surfing: most of the narrative energy lies in the descriptions of the surfing world, making boards and riding them, watching other people surf, reading the waves. It is almost mystical:

The push between wave and board was right there – a swift, elusive tension whispering over her shoulder. She got about six waves. Beautiful monsters she flew with. She pushed the wave, it pushed back, and every moment a different drop of ocean passed her on to the next. All that power, right there, tickling the soles of her feet, streaming from the rails of the board. It was close and unquenchable, like itchy gums, like a tickle in the throat. The wall flying up beside her was still, solid and smooth; fleeting, volatile unstable. How could
there be so few words for this? Surf, wave, water, curl, lip. It was nowhere near enough. (244)

The intensity of the surfing story tends to overshadow everything else, though Hardman has introduced what feels a bit like a checklist of current issues, like:

- Asylum seekers
- Racism
- Aboriginal land rights
- The Stolen Generation
- Breast cancer awareness
- Environmental degradation caused by rapacious development
- Etcetera.

All these things contribute to Cal’s rather belated coming of age narrative, but they aren’t all equally integrated. The Afghan boy, Hassan, is a charmingly naïve character, for example, but the novel doesn’t really need him. His plight isn’t given the attention it deserves, and though there is potential to draw some interesting parallels between his situation and that of the dispossessed aborigines, say, this doesn’t happen.

So *Nine Parts Water* suffers from the conflict between Hardman’s urge to display her opinions on everything she cares about in modern Australia, and her narrative drive to write a bildungsroman with a strong surfing theme. The result is not exactly a bad novel, but one that could be improved in many ways.