Luck in the Greater West won its author Damian McDonald the 2007 ABC Fiction Award, and it’s easy to see why. It’s a well-crafted, absorbing novel with many likeable characters, and it grapples with serious issues like endemic crime, poverty, sexual violence and intergenerational conflict with sensitivity and intelligence.

Patrick White, the incongruously-named hero, is an amiable drug dealer in Sydney’s western suburbs. He didn’t set out to be a drug dealer, it just seemed to be the thing to do. He meets Sonya, daughter of Russian migrants who live in a nearby flat. She’s a mature 16, still at school, but falls for Patrick, seeing something in him beyond the drug-dealing westie. Meanwhile, Abdullah, a thuggish teenager in a hot car, is picking up girls on the promise of drugs and, with a strong sense of self-justification, leading his mates in gang rape. Abdullah is astonishingly stupid:

He’d been charged. Assault. Sexual Assault. … It’d all get sorted though.

Once they’d listened to the full story … Surely these fuckin’ Aussie’ll understand: Aussie chicks are sluts. Ya fuck ’em, but don’t marry ’em. Who’d marry a chick who all ya mates’ve been through too?

Abdullah is the weakest link in the book. He has no redeeming features, he doesn’t understand what he’s done wrong, and he’s Lebanese. In contrast to Patrick, who’s white – Whitey for short, in fact – and who is honest about his failings, loves his girlfriend and tries to behave responsibly. Abdullah has a mate, Fadi, who has a conscience, so the Lebanese are not irredeemable, but for McDonald to make Abdullah into such a thoroughly unrepentant imbecile feels uncomfortable, especially
when Patrick is a so much better person. He manages better with his Italian police sergeant, who could easily have been a caricature of a brutal and corrupt cop, but turns out to be more or less fair and even understanding when his daughter gets into trouble.

McDonald’s great achievement in *Luck in the Greater West* is to give the westie a sympathetic voice, to humanise the druggie, semi-criminal subculture, to write with understanding about difficulties of getting ahead, or even holding a low-paying job, when you’ve got a criminal record and the police are hounding you even when you’re not breaking the law. Patrick’s life improves, but only marginally: McDonald resists the urge to romanticise his future, though he gives him the rather improbable thought that ‘There was a drive to be middle class in the west that was lost on Whitey but he did hope that his daughter would learn some of it. Not so much so she would have material success, but so she would have an understanding of how her world operated.’ One can’t help feeling that there’s a slight intrusion of the author’s consciousness operating here.

Although the link between the two plots is tenuous, McDonald orchestrates his large cast of characters well, and he is equally at ease with his female and male characters. Despite its grittiness, violence, drugs and bad language, *Luck in the Greater West* is imbued with optimism – children are reconciled with parents, new babies bring new hope, housing estates are redeveloped, violent criminals are jailed and humiliated. Is it middle-class wishful thinking? Perhaps, but this is an extremely accomplished first novel and visits territory that most educated Australians barely know exists.