The Con is Jesse Pentecost’s first novel, and it’s a beauty. It’s a witty and penetrating growing-up story set amongst music students at “The Con”, probably based not on one of the major Australian Conservatoria but perhaps the Canberra School of Music (where Pentecost studied piano): some of the geographical features, like the bushland setting and the tightly planned suburbs, are very reminiscent of Canberra. Exact identification isn’t provided, but at any rate it’s a small Australian city.

Derek Gunderson is a final year piano student, constantly distracted from his studies by attractive women, recreational drugs and drinking sessions with his mates. A fairly typical university student, but with an endearing modesty about his musical ability and his desirability to the opposite sex. The plot is satisfying but less than extraordinary, following Derek’s fortunes in sorting out his priorities and finding the right girl.

Pentecost’s narrator is a seemingly anarchic and delightfully intrusive, as bossy and controlling as his nineteenth century precursors like Trollope. Perhaps even more so:

But … sorry. Again, I surge ahead of myself. It’s the narrator’s curse. Let’s go back. Obsession is about arriving, it’s true, but reading is about journeying, so for narrative’s sake I’ll fill you in. How did it come to this? How did Derek get here, miles from home, a cyclist possessed, a fey light in his eyes? (187)

There is only one point at which this authorial forwardness gets tiresome, and that’s right at the end. In a mercifully short coda, Pentecost’s passion overflows the limits of
his narrative as he rails against the ignorance of musicians about the music they play, about the concept of creative Genius, and about the number of piano graduates who leave the Con with no career prospects:

For the majority of pianists, their graduation recital is the last performance they’ll ever give. Well, what did they except? Probably not that. It has been said that university is merely an expensive way to hang out with like-minded people. Nowhere is this truer than at conservatorium, where reality is held at bay for the duration of a bachelor degree, the sex is good, and all involved applaud each other on their position atop the cultural pile. This, of course, is the con.

These opinions have already been expressed more digestibly by Derek throughout the novel. It’s redundant and a bit galling to have them thrust upon us again from the author’s mouth, while we’re basking in the glow of a satisfactory conclusion to a novel which is otherwise pretty much a tour de force, with lots of interesting gen on classical music, vividly imagined characters, and a structure which is much sturdier than it seems on the surface. *The Con* was highly commended in the ABC Fiction Awards, but I think it deserved to win.