

Anne de Lisle has written four historical romances and a memoir, and has now tried her hand at contemporary romance with a tinge of women’s lib with *The Swim Club*.

Her heroine, forty-year-old Charlie (short for Charlotte), is a writer of historical romances herself. Two years ago she and her twin sons were abandoned by her husband, who left them for a seventeen-year-old ex-student. This seems to cause her more embarrassment than grief: in her small Queensland town she believes people think of her as a failed wife who drove her husband to paedophilia.

Charlie has a clutch of girlfriends about her own age. There’s Laura, a GP married to an artist; Karen, whose husband has just drowned, and her friend Wendy, whose husband’s importunate sexual demands – every morning and night! – is a cause of great hilarity among the girls. And then there is Cate, in her early thirties and married to an older man whose family doesn’t approve. These five women take up swimming at the local pool for exercise and bonding. One thing leads to another and they end up competing in triathlons while at the same time sorting out all their relationship problems.

Why we should be interested in this group of late onset adolescents is not entirely clear. Charlie’s not the brightest spark: she fails to recognise the potential in the nice smile of her eventual love interest for almost the whole book, and when her friend becomes pregnant the reader is onto it well before she is. She is as self-conscious about her body as the most pathetic of fourteen-year-olds, and she panics when pursued by a good-looking man. The widow Karen is the sentimental
inspiration of the group, bearing up bravely under her bereavement and spurring them on to ever greater achievements. The other women each have their own problems with men. And then Charlie’s ex reappears wanting to see his sons after three years, and she is full of righteous outrage. There is nothing to be said in favour of this scoundrel, but in her magnanimity she allows him to see the boys on certain strict conditions.

In de Lisle’s world, obstacles vanish obediently from her characters’ paths. Charlie’s sons enjoy a violent game called Skirmish. This is how Charlie successfully convinces the boys to stop complaining about being left with friends while she’s off competing:

If you had two puppies that you loved more than anything in the world, but every time you wanted to play Skirmish you had to find some kind, considerate person, who you trusted, to look after your puppies … what would you do? Would you never play Skirmish again, or would you let your trusted friend guard your puppies for you occasionally?

I might be out of touch with modern youth, but I can’t imagine any self-respecting eleven-year-old falling for this. The psychology is improbable, all the situations are black-and-white, and the characters and dialogue are wooden. Sure it’s a romance, but despite Charlie’s protestations throughout the book that she is happy and strong as a single woman, and the emphasis on the friendship of the five women, there is a tedious inevitability about the heterosexual pair-bonds formed or re-formed in the final pages.