This is the author’s radio script of this article.
The Fragment of Dreams by Phillipa Fioretti. Hachette, 2011
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 28 May 2011

The Fragment of Dreams is a sequel to Phillipa Fioretti’s first novel, The Book of Love, which concerned the theft, by an attractive young book dealer’s faithless lover and business partner, of a book said to be worth $20 million dollars. As anyone who knows the first thing about the antiquarian book business would know, this is a wildly unlikely premise, but I suppose that shouldn’t spoil the fun.

The Fragment of Dreams continues the romance begun in the first book, between Lily, the book dealer, and William Isyanov, an expert in tracking down and retrieving stolen antiquities. William has decided to give up his exciting but dangerous profession in favour of a more settled job in Rome. Lily is about to sell the Sydney bookshop and move to Italy to be with him, though she hasn’t yet agreed to marry him, when she discovers a previously unknown branch of the family, and complications ensue, involving the disappearance of a marble fragment of an Italian frieze, also worth multi-millions, and an attempted murder for which William is the prime suspect. As the narrative is focalised through William and Lily more or less equally, we know that he’s not guilty, so the suspense (such as it is) is sustained by the unlikely possibility that these two new lovers will fail to overcome their suspicions of each other, to unite to foil the real villain and to fall rapturously into bed at the end.

The silliness of the plot is one thing: I know better than to require plausibility from romantic fiction, though the amount of miscommunication and misunderstanding between Lily and William began to feel mechanical and manipulative by about the middle of the book – phones running out of charge, internet connections out of order, messages not passed on by jealous assistants and so on. But all this could be forgiven if the characters were likeable and believable, and the narrative written with economy and deftness. Sadly this is not the case. At the beginning of the book, exposition by dialogue is rife, resulting in one sister telling another, for example, ‘Mum must have lied to us. She told us Dad dropped dead suddenly after a heart attack when you were two months old, didn’t she?’ And even when they’re not blatantly explaining the backstory, their conversations are clichéd and wooden. Lily’s sister Poppy feels the need to tell William, ‘If she’s hurt in any way, I’ll do whatever I can to get her away from you, and then hunt you down to the far ends of the earth - with a big stick in hand.’ A huge amount of the narrative is just superfluous scene-setting. Lily has a dog whose only role is to be cute and he often gets under the story’s feet, threatening to trip it up as it tries to move forward. Lily’s wardrobe consists of antique clothes and her look is always based on a famous movie heroine of the golden years of Hollywood. Choosing the right look is a constant preoccupation. However, with cavalier injustice, we are told that her rival for William’s affections ‘was humourless and in true Italian fashion obsessed over her clothes.’

Fioretti has tried to enliven her story by endowing her characters with charming eccentricities, like Lily’s clothes, or her predilection for making marmalade, or William’s habit of sketching when under stress. But this by itself doesn’t do the trick. Severe pruning of extraneous detail, and more attention to natural speech rhythms, would be a more effective way to make these cardboard cutouts into believable, living, breathing people.