This is the author's radio script of this article.
Alaska by Sue Saliba (Penguin, 2011)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 23 July 2011

Sue Saliba’s latest young adult novel, Alaska, is a bittersweet bildungsroman on the tried and true themes of learning who to trust, and whether your loyalties lie with your family or your lover.

18 year old Mia has left her alcoholic mother back in Melbourne to stay with her sister Em and her family in Alaska. Though she doesn’t warm to her brother-in-law, Mia is entranced by the forest near their house, where she meets Ethan Alvarez one day, carrying a bucket mysteriously containing two fish. ‘fish that swim through forest?’ she asks incredulously, but is charmed by his response, ‘yes, why not?’ She starts spending time in his house, and in his bed. Their interaction is rarefied and elliptical:

and then she said, ‘what does a deer stand for? i mean … what does the soul of a deer represent?’

he thought for a minute and then he answered, ‘it stands for transformation, for things changing in the most unlikely of ways.’

and she closed her eyes as if this might help her maintain his knowledge. no, as if this help her make it hers, that was it.

she felt it rest inside her body. (77)

It becomes increasingly clear that Mia sees the world through a haze of romantic illusion. The fish are explained, and there are some signs that Ethan might not be the exquisite, other-worldly being she takes him for: he seems less than wholehearted about her involvement in a protest to save the forest from an oil company which wants to put a pipeline through it. Her mind also begins to turn back to her mother, and she begins to be more inclined to go home and help her rather than blaming her for her affliction.

Alaska suffers a little from preciousness, not least because the whole text is in lower case. I am not convinced that this amounts to more than an annoying gimmick. It makes the beginnings of sentences hard to distinguish, and also leads to some potentially comic misreadings of Mia’s sister’s name. Em is presumably short for Emily or Emma, but when spelt e m in lower case, it’s easy to read it as a colloquial abbreviation for ‘them’ which works against the effect Saliba is working so hard to achieve. But this little touch of pretentiousness is surely part of Saliba’s characterization of Mia, and Alaska is a subtle and poetic portrayal of adolescent sensibility and gradually dawning maturity which should appeal to the more thoughtful among the older teens.