**Last Summer.** Kylie Ladd (Allen & Unwin, 2011)  

Kylie Ladd’s second novel *Last Summer* is based around the members of a cricket club. Rory Buchanan, the captain and natural leader of a group of friends, universally idolized, drops dead suddenly, at forty. The novel follows the lives of nine people in this group as they deal with the shock of his death.

*Last Summer* is structurally ambitious. Each of the nine characters is given equal time – a chapter each in the first and second halves of the novel. A chapter in the middle is devoted to a New Year’s Eve party and a chapter at the end describes a memorial cricket match, each of these chapters in turn divided equally among these characters. Nine people is a lot to get to know intimately in a 300-page book, and, at least in the first half, the time spent on exposition and the effort required in sorting out these people, and their children, and their interrelationships, makes for some measure of tedium, along these lines:

‘Is Will enjoying playing with the Kookaburras?’ Pete asked. James’s son had commenced in the lowest grade of the junior competition just that season: the Kookaburras were open to any child under the age of twelve. Max, Pete’s own son, had begun the year before, joining Joe’s three boys and Rory’s two.

A joke is occasionally attempted: one mother complains that since her daughters ‘had commenced at a local church school earlier that year they had become unaccountably devout, and with that somewhat prudish.’ At least, I think it’s a joke.

The second half is better: though the style doesn’t get much more exciting, the plot gains a certain momentum, and at the end there are some situations left interestingly unresolved.

Part of the difficulty might be that all the characters are married people in their thirties or early forties. There’s Rory’s widow, his sister and her husband, and three of his friends and their wives. They all have children, and although each couple has their own set of problems the differences between them are not marked. One inevitably compares it to Christos Tsiolkas’ *The Slap*, which has eight points of view in a similar suburban setting, but each character is very clearly defined. Another point of difference is the central incident which is at the heart of *The Slap*, the basis for the moral dilemma which splits the characters into two opposing camps, is absent in *Last Summer*. Rory’s death is no-one’s fault, and he had no murky secrets. The kinds of reactions set off among his friends are not exceptional: his sister and his oldest friend become withdrawn and distant towards their spouses; one of the wives meets an old flame at the funeral and gets drawn into a flirtation; another one of the wives decides to look for her birth mother and is disappointed when she meets her; a third wife leaves her husband, who then has a brief fling with Rory’s widow. Meanwhile the children are wetting beds, avoiding their friends, having nightmares, worrying their parents. Ladd has a background in psychology, and these are no doubt all clinically sound symptoms of grief. That doesn’t make them compelling subjects for fiction.

There’s a good deal of explicit sex and cricket in this novel, but one thing in its favour is that it’s neither a women’s novel nor a man’s novel – not ‘lad-lit’ or ‘chicklit’ – or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that it’s a bit of both, evenly shared between the sexes. I did become quite engrossed in the later parts of the novel, but I’m not sure that I would have got that far if I hadn’t been reviewing it. Fewer or more varied points of view – perhaps including one of the children – might have helped lift *Last Summer* out of the usual run of suburban melodramas.