This is the author's radio script of this article.
There’s no one quite like Nick Earls. Reading his novels is a warming, cheering experience, even when the plot concerns a violent death and a troubled friendship.

Josh Lang, the narrator-protagonist of *The Fix*, has ambitions to be an investigative journalist, but has ended up working in public relations. He has just returned to Brisbane from a few years in London, where he had a well-paying job until the global financial crisis put an end to it. He’s drifted into an aimless way of life, writing a weekly newspaper blog which hardly pays the rent:

> It was a fraction of a job ... so that saw me whoring myself around anywhere that might take a few words on anything, or fund me to subject myself to any mildly degrading experience that might have a story in it. I had found myself living at a time when trivia had been elevated to high status, and it turned out I could make myself far more trivial than I had ever imagined, when there was money on offer. (32-33)

Earls gleefully grasps the opportunity this affords him to take Josh into quirky settings like King Tutt Putt Putt minigolf, and the back of house at a strip club. Josh’s older brother, Brett, also in PR, offers him some work, and Josh suspects that he’s heard on the family grapevine that he’s hard up. ‘I wondered if the job was complete charity. I took a long slow breath, and I sucked it up’ (13).

The complication is that the job involves a former friend of Josh’s, Ben Harkin. Ben is about to receive a bravery award for tackling an armed man and saving his boss’ life, although the gunman was accidentally killed in the struggle. Ben seems strangely reluctant to celebrate his award, but his boss wants to make the maximum media mileage out of it. Ben and Josh have some history – there was a girl involved, and their falling out was the reason for his leaving the country. Josh is sure there’s something he’s not being told, and his attempts to find out, while at the same time getting the story in the papers and spinning Ben as Australia’s newest hero, drive the plot along at a good steady pace.

When you think of the plot of Earls’ last novel, *The True Story of Butterfish*, this one has a several elements in common: a pleasant, clever and self-deprecating male protagonist returns to Brisbane from overseas, with a couple of important male relationships – with a brother and a friend – to iron out. Along the way he teams up with an attractive, intelligent woman – in this case a law student who works part time as a stripper – but the male relationships are actually more important. I’m not saying he’s written the same book twice: *The Fix* has more narrative tension, with a mystery to be solved, and the animus Josh feels for Ben affects his behaviour. Josh is younger and more naïve than Curtis in *Butterfish*. But the pleasures of the books are similar: wry, quirky humour, likeable characters, and nicely observed relationships. Earls doesn’t deal with the dark or desperate side of life: the only addiction Josh has is to fortune cookies, and even that’s under control.

In his acknowledgements, Earls says, ‘I saw a movie in this story before I worked out the novel.’ It’s true it would work well as a film, and I look forward to seeing it some day soon. Meanwhile, I’ll be looking forward to his next novel.