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*Little People* by Jane Sullivan. Scribe, 2011

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 26 November 2011

*Little People*, Jane Sullivan's second novel, is an historical romance with hints of the gothic, involving the troupe of dwarfs, or 'little people', who toured Australia in 1870 under the auspices of the ubiquitous P.T. Barnum. This tour seems such a gift to the novelist that it's surprising that this is the first novel to deal with it, but a search of Austlit confirms that it is.

Sullivan has chosen a fictional and 'full-sized' young woman as her heroine. Mary Ann Carroll is that stock figure of Victorian melodrama, the governess deflowered by her employer and cast out into the world with nothing but an inconvenient unborn child. About to throw herself into the Yarra, she sees what looks like a small child fall from a bridge, and saves his life. This 'child' turns out to be Charles Warren, aka General Tom Thumb, and in gratitude the management of the troupe employ Mary Ann as a general dogsbody. Warren and his wife Lavinia offer to adopt her baby, provided that the child proves 'suitable'.

There are of course many complications, involving a tall red-headed pianist who has re-christened himself Franz, a 'merely small' coachman and his 'lilliputian' brother, and a scheming doctor with a sinister collection of grotesqueries. There is an abduction and a duel on the beach; they endure a desert crossing and a flood, which are based on historical events but don't play much part in the novel's storyline. Mary Ann's first-person narrative is studded with what are titled 'Sideshowes', short accounts from the points of view of members of the troupe, where we learn of their insecurities, jealousies and rivalries, and find out a little about their attitudes to Mary Ann and the unrealistic plans they have for her child.

Creating a young woman like Mary Ann, who is normal in size (though she does have unusual webs between her fingers) feels a little like a lost opportunity. She is certainly a worthy heroine, honest and brave and intelligent, but her persona – her voice – is rather dull. The novel relies for its distinctiveness on the peculiarities of the 'little people' and the wickedness of those who exploit them, with a formulaic plot structure for the narrative drive. The interpolated 'sideshowes' are sometimes affecting, but choosing to represent Charles Warren as a four-year-old boy trapped in an ageing though small body feels perilously like infantilising him because of his dwarfism. The short Afterword, explaining the historical background and the eventual fate of the members of the troupe, is actually more poignant than the fictional version.

Inevitably *Little People* will be compared with Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, and I'm afraid it will always come out second best. A major part of brilliance of Carey's novel lies in the unique voice of his diminutive acrobat. Mary Ann Carroll, on the other hand, is not a memorable heroine and though it's a well-written, carefully researched novel with an exciting climax, *Little People* is not in the same league.