This is the author’s radio script of this article.
**A Common Loss by Kirsten Tranter. 4th Estate, 2012.**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 3 April 2012.

Kirsten Tranter makes a quiet but solid follow-up to her magnificent first novel, *The Legacy*, with *A Common Loss*. Though it’s in no way a sequel, it shares the earlier novel’s elegiac feeling of retrospection and the theme of the troubles the dead can bequeath to the living. The painful process of revising memories of a treasured friendship adds another layer of uncertainty to this subtle narrative.

Elliot is one of five young American men who have known each other since college, and who have a tradition of an annual trip to Las Vegas which has hardened into a somewhat tiresome habit over the course of a decade. Now they are preparing to go through the motions again, even though one of their number, the charming, dependable Dylan, has recently been killed in a road accident, and two of the others haven’t spoken to each other for years. As the preparations and then the holiday itself proceed, Elliot learns things about Dylan which force him to change his mind about their shared past.

Although there are of course many distinguished precedents, Tranter has taken a gamble, writing a first-person narrative from a male point of view. Elliot is a bit ineffectual, a bit of a loner. For the first few pages his sex isn’t made clear, and Dylan appears in a dream as a figure of power and grace, as if he was a former lover. It gives a slight jolt when we realise that this female writer is writing in a male persona. But although Elliot and his friends don’t seem the type of people who would normally choose to holiday in Las Vegas, the rationale is plausible – the force of a tradition begun years before, and the difficulty of agreeing on a change when there are such fissures in the group. The trashiness of Vegas is underlined and ironised by the presence of the girlfriend of one of the group who is writing a cultural studies thesis on fakery.

Elliot is an English professor who dislikes poetry. He has a special animus towards Tennyson, whose poem *In Memoriam* had been connected with a compromising episode involving Dylan which now resurfaces to haunt him. But this poem provides the title and the epigraph for the novel:

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That loss is common would not make
My own less bitter, rather more:
Too common! Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break.
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Henry James was, of course, the presiding genius of *The Legacy*. His influence can be felt in *A Common Loss* as well, but *In Memoriam* is the explicit intertext. Tennyson’s elegy for his friend clearly has parallels with Elliot’s grief over Dylan’s death, but he had found when trying to write a college essay that ‘The poet’s tortured reflections on his inability to find words to express his grief only seemed to mirror my own excruciating inability to understand the significance of the whole thing.’ It’s significant that this unreliable narrator, who only slowly comes to understand what has been happening during the ten years he has known Dylan, should be defeated by the poetry whose spirit suffuses this novel.

I can’t say that *A Common Loss* is quite as magical a work as *The Legacy*, but it’s still an engrossing, thoughtful novel, well-crafted and full of pleasures, great and small.