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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
**Fishing for Tigers. Emily Maguire. Picador, 2012.**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, recorded 8 September 2012

I thought of writing this review while I was halfway through reading Emily Maguire’s new novel, *Fishing for Tigers*. I usually try to put a little distance between reading a book and reviewing it, to get ‘perspective’. But reviewing etiquette forbids me from disclosing the ending anyway, so why not write it while immersed in the experience? Professional caution counselled otherwise, however, so I am writing this in full knowledge of an ending I can’t tell you about, but I still haven’t quite lost that feeling that anything that happens around me is a nuisance if it demands that I stop reading. Of course, I was expecting nothing less from this novel, having devoured *Smoke in the Room* in 2009 and immediately pounced on Maguire’s back catalogue.

Mischa, a thirty-something Australian, is a refugee from a marriage to a violent and dominating Californian. She has lived in Hanoi for six years, among expats and transients, not learning the language or forming any significant ties. She became used to a world where ‘in work and food and housing I’d got not what I wanted but what I could ask for. My opinions and insights became as childish as the fragments of language I had to express them.’ She is harsh on herself and her friends: ‘The people who would become my social world were in Hanoi because it was the only place they’d found where they could get away with being who they were’, that is, ‘damaged fuck-up[s] unable to thrive in [their] own land.’ Mischa, unlike most of her friends, is relatively celibate, not for any noble reasons but because a tall Australian red-head in her thirties is apparently not sought-after in the bars of Hanoi. However, this changes when her friend’s son comes to visit.

Cal is 18. His Australian father lives in Hanoi, and his Vietnamese mother in Sydney. He is bright and beautiful and falls in love with Mischa, who can only sustain the role of benevolent aunt for so long. From the beginning of the novel we are invited to expect that this affair cannot go well. With her genius for sentences with a sting in the tail, she writes of her memories of Hanoi, ‘the apartment overlooking the cathedral and the boy stretched on the bed, as cool and toxic as the rushing Red River.’

Maguire writes, compellingly, about transgressive love, about breaking the rules in a transcultural setting where you don’t always know what they are. Her Vietnam is full of smells and sights both confronting and beguiling. It’s not a tourist destination, but a place where people can be hostile or welcoming or just indifferent and you’re not always sure why. In a way, all her books are about places like this, because her characters are people who do not quite belong in their own lives, even if they live in their home town. Mischa is an unreliable but still very sympathetic character, and her cynical commentary on the pretensions of western expats is mitigated by her uncertainty about herself and where she fits in that picture – though Maguire can’t resist a swipe at *Eat, Pray, Love*. But satire is not the main game here: *Fishing for Tigers* is at the core a passionate love story about outsiders who need to learn how to live in their own lives, to make themselves a home somewhere.