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This is the author's radio script of this article.

*Like a House on Fire*. Cate Kennedy. Scribe, 2012

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 1 December 2012.

Cate Kennedy's new story collection, *Like a House on Fire*, will not deprive you of sleep or take your breath away. Its pleasures are subtle, but nonetheless profound. The everyday appallingness of her characters' lives is observed with clarity and the wry bleakness which is implied in the epigraph, from Kafka, 'In the fight between you and the world, back the world'. But more often than not, she gives them a break – a small gesture to begin repairs to a fractured marriage, or the fortitude to get on with what can't be avoided. She is anything but sardonic about these people. She likes them, and so do we.

In the title story, for example. A husband with a crippling back injury which is persisting much longer than expected lies on the family room floor, listening to his family.

You get good at listening to sounds in a household when you're prone; it gets so you can almost hear a head shaking in pained disbelief, or distant teeth grinding in the silence following the lifting of the washing-machine lid and finding the clothes set on 'wash' this morning still there, strangled and spun around the agitator, and a husband who can't pull things out and can't hang things up. (78-9)

But the story ends with 'temporary respite' as Christmas morning dawns. Another Christmas day, in 'Static', brings the quiet desperation in a marriage to a brittle breaking point, as a man's mother wages a pointless war with his wife over the smoked-salmon blinis. It's tempting to perceive a thread of social critique in the collection, and there is often a glancing blow at the plastic, fast-food crappiness of modern urban life. However, this beleaguered man longs for ordinariness and simplicity:

He recalls going to Safeway just the night before, running up and down the aisles searching for cranberries in syrup. The person ahead of him at the check-outs was buying four barbeque chickens, salad mix and a big tub of choc-chip ice-cream, and Anthony had felt an overwhelming, childish longing to follow them out and curl up in the back of their car and go home to their place. (223)

Men, women and children share the points of view in these stories, some in the first and some in the third person. The final story, the longest, 'Seventy-Two Derwents', is the sixth-grade journal written by a girl with a touching adoration of her teacher and a home life apparently heading for disaster. The naivete of the narrator strains the credibility a bit, making it the least successful of the stories, but even so it's absorbing and poignant. Read them for their quiet satisfactions and their small mercies.