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

The Retreaters. Sharlene Miller Brown. ABC Books, 2008.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 27 June 2008.

Sharlene Miller Brown's first novel, *The Retreaters*, is set at the luxurious Cottonwood Retreat, a resort hotel in Central Western New South Wales. But she is concerned not with hotel guests but with the invisible people who make the luxury happen – cleaners and laundry workers. Not that this novel is trying to make a political point: as the main character thinks to herself, 'nothing is *consistent* with literature. Literature is its own self.' [my emphasis]

Since her English teacher parents were killed in a car accident 16 years before, Liv has immersed herself in the books they taught. Lines from Dickens and Shakespeare come to her naturally: she finds her solace in literature, and unlike earlier heroines, literature doesn't mislead her. She was until recently a library assistant at the public library in the nearby Hatton River township. The state government has withdrawn funding, the library is closed, and Liv, at thirty, has to take a cleaning job at the resort. The aunt she has been nursing through a long illness dies and leaves her with nothing; the house, now owned by her cousins, is being sold, so she moves to staff accommodation at the Retreat. The very day she is to move, she finds herself enveloped in silence: her hearing is gone, and there seems to be no medical reason. Liv has learned not to ask for much from life, but she becomes gripped by desire for the gardener, Mason, and I don't know when I've read such a convincing evocation of primal animal sexuality. At the same time she is being drawn into a calmer and more enduring kind of friendship with the cheerful English chef, Ben.

Also in the staff quarters is another cleaner, Grace, who lives with her eight-year-old son, Jake. Jake is worried about his mother because, ever since his sister drowned the year before, she seems to sleep all the time. Jake is a bright but odd little boy, with a resourceful spirit and a lively imagination, craving friends but able to occupy himself in his isolation: the Retreat is a place for adults, and his chief duty is to keep out of sight of the guests in case he annoys 'management' and his mother loses her tenuous hold on her job. He haunts the river bank, and thinks perhaps that the ghost of his sister does too.

The third in this trio is Evelyn, the laundry lady. Cantankerous and pushing seventy, she works because she's made that way – 'work always seemed a better option than marriage.' She lives a Spartan life from choice, throws stones at possums and stirs up the local do-gooders whom she has known all her life, until she has a minor epiphany and starts belatedly changing her ways.

Around these three rather solitary individuals at different stages of life, Miller Brown has woven an intelligent and moving novel, with its own small dramas but without sentimentality or melodrama. Events are plausible but not predictable, and though it's not tightly plotted, it moves along at a good steady pace and the reader's interest is sustained by the story as well as the unobtrusive delights of Miller Brown's prose. The sense of place is strong – the river is like another character, and the setting is described with a gentle, unpretentious lyricism. It's not a comedy, but there is quiet humour throughout. *The Retreaters* is a original and subtle work, unusually assured for a first novel.