The Steele Diaries is Wendy James’ second novel. A family saga set in Sydney and country New South Wales, with three generations of women, two of them famous artists, a daughter reading her dead mother’s diaries and discovering devastating secrets – hasn’t it all been done before, by Sue Woolfe, Peter Carey and countless others? Perhaps, but there is something unique about The Steele Diaries, not in the plot or the setting, but in its thoughtful and perceptive approach to the characters.

The grandmother of this trio is the painter Annie Swift, beautiful and amoral, briefly married to Ed Steele, another painter, later to become world famous. The child of their union, Zelda, spends the first six months of her life as a resented encumbrance to her mother. She is then handed over to an older couple, wealthy patrons of the arts Jules and Paul Holland. Under heavy pressure from the rather appalling Jules to fulfil the artistic destiny thought to be bequeathed by her parents, Zelda grows up feeling unloved and inadequate. Her diaries make up a good portion of the narrative, as she struggles through a lonely and awkward adolescence, finds and loses the love of her life and finds her own artistic niche. Her daughter, Ruth, decades after her mother’s early death, is a GP in Sydney, in a less than inspiring relationship. Her father’s death brings her back to the family home in western New South Wales, where she finds the diaries and gradually discovers some life-changing secrets, while at the same time falling for an old schoolmate.
Zelda’s diary is the centre of the book. Zelda is the character we most empathise with, whose private thoughts we share. She starts writing her diary in 1959, when she is 14, and it evolves with her from the impulsive exclamations of youth to the musings of a young mother trying to find space in her life for her own creative work. The last few years of entries are written, with weary detachment, in the second person, almost like an incantation:

Lately you find yourself petrified, as if you have had a spell cast upon you by some wicked witch: you have become the sleeping beauty, or been turned to stone, a statue. You will be doing something – some everlasting never-ending task – washing dishes, clothes, scrubbing the floor, dicing potatoes, it could be anything – but suddenly you stick, stop, stutter like a malfunctioning cartoon robot.

This is very effective, although in general the styles of the two narratives, Zelda’s and Ruth’s, are too similar, often using the same stylistic devices. Always there is the difficulty of how to handle voices from the past: whether to try to mimic an historical style, or write in the modern vernacular. The overall style of the novel is neither mannered nor aggressively contemporary, and is flexible enough to suit either character. There would not be a problem if there were no contrast to be made between narratives from different periods, but in this case I felt more could have been done to distinguish the mother’s narrative from the daughter’s.
But it’s a minor problem. *The Steele Diaries* is engrossing, intelligent and thoroughly enjoyable.