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

*Taking Off*. Matt Howard. Arena, 2008.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 11 October 2008.

According to his media release, Matt Howard's interests are writing, travelling, playing pool and drinking. He manages to give all these hobbies a run in his second novel, *Taking Off*.

Ash Lynch is in a rut. He has been living with his sister and her disabled husband Jake, and working at a dead-end office job, for a decade or more since he was orphaned as a teenager. He has never left his home town of Perth. At the bar where his colleagues gather for tedious birthday drinks, he meets Miller, a drifter working his way round Australia, and is immediately attracted by both his coolness and his warmth: Miller, the barman, finds out more about Ash's life after one conversation than his so-called friends can be bothered to remember after knowing him for years. But this is a buddy novel, not a gay odyssey. Howard emphasises Ash's hetero cred by making him fall in love with Zoe about the same time, though this is only a red herring. Zoe turns out to be unobtainable, so Ash decides to take off to Europe with Miller.

Once he's abandoned all hope of scoring Zoe, things fall into place for Ash pretty neatly. The disabled brother-in-law, Jake, was an airline employee before the accident that left him a paraplegic and has amassed an apparently unlimited supply of airmiles, which he happily bestows on Ash and Miller so they can fly wherever they like. They start in Amsterdam, where Miller cuts a swathe through ranks of the local females, and Ash tries dope for the first time, and meets Cali, a beautiful Greek girl. The guys travel to Berlin, happily drinking, playing pool, and smoking pot, then to Cali's Greek island, at her invitation. There's a lot of local colour, travelogue style,

along the way, but not much to raise any anxiety for Ash's future welfare and happiness. Howard seems to realise this, and sets up a few obstacles, but they're easily surmounted – a bad acid trip causes a nasty incident, but teaches Ash that hard drugs aren't for him; a slight misunderstanding threatens his romance and his friendship with Miller, but it's quickly resolved after the barest minimum of narrative tension.

Ash is an innocent abroad, disarmingly modest about his own attractive qualities – he can't understand why Miller likes him. His narrative style is genial and slightly folksy, in a down-on-the-prairie kind of way, with expressions like 'most everyone' and 'anyways'. It's not hilarious, but sometimes raises a chuckle: Cali tells Ash, 'I know if it's meant to be it will happen,' which he decides sounds 'a bit New Age but not so much so as you'd start to worry.' It's a pleasant ride, tagging along with these characters as they sort out their not particularly difficult lives, discover that Burger King is not the only place to eat, and that holding down a steady job isn't essential for a happy life. Although perhaps the plausibility factor is a little on the low side, *Taking Off* is a thoroughly likeable book.