This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Christos Tsiolkas is once again challenging readers with his new novel, *The Slap*. In *Dead Europe* he ripped the veneer off complacent liberal attitudes to racism. Now with *The Slap* he sets about disturbing comfortable suburban pieties about violence, friendship, family and children.

The media release describes Tsiolkas as ‘a writer who loves to take on taboos, and believes his writing to be a form of activism.’ However it is not activism as the word is usually understood, with its connotations of self-righteousness and moral certainty. The media release, further, claims that this is ‘a book which will find a passionate opinion in every reader – on which side do *you* stand?’ Perhaps Tsiolkas *is* trying to polarise readers, though this is more likely someone’s idea of effective media hype. In any event, that is not what happens in *The Slap*. In the end one is left with the unsettling but enlivening feeling that neither side was entirely right or wrong, and that there are as many possible opinions on what happens as there are characters in the novel, or indeed readers.

What happens is this. At a suburban Melbourne barbecue held by Hector and his wife Aisha, Hugo, four-year-old son of Aisha’s friend Rosie, is slapped by Hector’s cousin Harry. It is not exactly an unprovoked attack: Hugo is wielding a cricket bat and seems about to hit Harry’s eight-year-old son with it. So already there is a degree of moral ambiguity. Harry is defending his own child; Hugo is spoilt and out of control. It was only a slap; but perhaps it is always wrong to hit a child?
Tsiolkas treads surefootedly among these troubling questions. Moving through eight different points of view as the narrative proceeds, crossing three generations and a thoroughly Australian mix of ethnic backgrounds – Greek, English, Indian, Jewish – he allows us to see that Harry is hardly a villain but smug, unimaginative and rather stupid, with a streak of brutality, while the child’s mother, Rosie, is barely holding it together, compensating for an unhappy marriage by overindulging her child, whom she is still breastfeeding at the age of four. She calls the police, encouraged by the outrage of her friends, and there is a trial. Harry and Hector and their Greek family can’t understand the fuss; Aisha and her young colleague Connie find Harry’s action unforgivable. This circle of family and friends, already uneasy with class and race biases and personal frictions, cracks along these faultlines.

But Tsiolkas is not cynical or pessimistic. He challenges taboos: he will describe without sentimentality what happens between a husband and wife, or among drug-fuelled teenagers, but as in Dead Europe he leaves his readers believing that whatever the difficulties and compromises entailed, love is not only possible but fundamental. The Slap is provocative and profane, throbbing with sex, drugs and rock and roll, and ultimately, for all its ferocity, exultantly life-affirming.