Lucienne Joy is an Australian radio journalist, and *Ulterior Motives* is her first novel. Her character Coco is also a radio journalist, working in an English language radio station in Monaco, just as Joy herself did. And, like the author, she pairs up with a man whose sexual proclivities tend to the ‘dark side’, as he puts it.

Coco is in her mid-thirties when she takes the job at Radio Côte d’Azur, presenting an English language chat show to the expat community, most of whom she thoroughly despises. In fact it’s not as glamorous as it sounds, and her life is going nowhere. She has moved to France because she finds Australian men boorish, alcoholic and sexist, and prefers the French variety, particularly a married one called Xavier whom she had met in Noumea. Xavier being unavailable, she has decided to go to the source, though with little success. Then she meets an American called Jack Villeneuve – half Swiss – and despite a fifteen-year age difference and some misgivings, she falls for him and they get married within a couple of months.

Sex is at the heart of this novel, and the descriptions are graphic, though not particularly erotic. At first all seems well, though Coco is a bit puzzled when Jack gives her a S & M porno novel as soon as they arrive home from their honeymoon. Jack keeps trying to introduce more kinky practices into their bedroom, and Coco reluctantly goes along with it, as he verbally bullies her with Jungian jargon about ‘exploring the limits’ of their sexuality and patronises her for what he calls her naivete.
One of the sins Coco attributes to Australian men is a tendency to kiss and tell, but everything Jack does is faithfully related to her girlfriend Stevie and sometimes to her other friends as well. There is something rather disconcerting about the dependence of this woman of 35 on the advice and opinions of these friends: should she go out with Jack, should she marry him, was his taste for dirty talk during sex normal? When she finally catches him in what is to her an unforgivable act and tells him where he can stick his ‘rationalisations and self-serving justifications’, without asking her friends first, I felt like cheering.

In the end Jack is hardly an arch-villain, and I wonder about the title. ‘Ulterior motives’ are not really established: Coco has an epiphany when she finds the words to tell him, ‘Let’s face it, Jack, we married the wrong people.’ Jack is in the end rather a pathetic figure: despite his psychobabble he ends up alone and unhappy.

There is power in this description of a marriage rashly contracted and soon regretted, but it is dissipated by too much journalistic scene-setting. Coco can’t seem to narrate a simple conversation without going off on chatty tangents – the history of Nice, memories of her Catholic childhood, celebrities she has interviewed – some of it vaguely relevant, but always getting in the way of the narrative flow. The novel’s autobiographical origins may be partly responsible: Joy needs to refine the art of selection. There is a dark and compelling novella stifled within these 400-odd pages.