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


Siew Siang Tay was born in Malaysia and moved to Adelaide in 1992. Handpicked is her first novel.

Her heroine, Laila, is a young Malaysian woman who has chosen to escape her suffocating village life by becoming a so-called mail-order bride. She travels to South Australia to meet Jim, who she firmly believes loves her, lives in a nice three-bedroom house, works in the prosperous fruit industry and has saved enough money from his wages to pay for Laila’s fares and an extravagant wedding.

It doesn’t take long before Jim’s carelessness with the truth becomes obvious. Instead of a spacious red-brick home, Laila finds that all he can offer her is a dilapidated caravan. His fruit-picking is barely enough to keep them fed and clothed, and there’s nothing to spare for saving up for a house: the money he used for her fares and the wedding came from his inheritance and it’s all spent. And to cap it all, he refuses to let her get a job: ‘No wife of mine is going to work,’ he blusters. Life in the caravan becomes impossible, and Jim spends more and more time in the pub, while Laila, bored and miserable, falls prey to the handsome and sleazy Sean.

It’s a sad and predictable story, but Tay tells it simply and without pretension. She avoids pushing all the obvious buttons. The narrative is split between husband and wife, and Jim, despite his shortcomings, is not demonised. Though he is often obviously at fault, his very ordinariness is affecting and his past is as impoverished in its way as Laila’s. Among their friends there is another cross-cultural couple who have made a happy marriage in similar circumstances, so Jim and Laila’s problems
are not made to bear the whole weight of disapproval of the dubious practice of choosing a marriage partner by correspondence. And there is a hopeful if not happy ending: the possibility of a new beginning for these two likeable but underprivileged souls.

Tay’s writing is clear, measured and evocative. Her ear for the Australian vernacular is faultless, though occasionally the dialogue continues longer than needed and becomes slightly laboured: it could sometimes be pared back to good effect. Otherwise, *Handpicked* is a well-crafted, touching and intelligent novel about a subject which, though full of interesting narrative possibilities, novelists have for some reason hitherto left unexplored.