The Lost Life. Steven Carroll (4th Estate, 2009)

The Lost Life is the new novel from Miles Franklin Award and Commonwealth Writers’ Prize winner Steven Carroll. Following his quite superb evocation of a Melbourne suburban family in the trilogy which culminated with the winning novel, The Time We Have Taken, he has now turned to a completely different setting: a village in the Cotswolds in the 1930s, where a young woman named Catherine lives with her mother.

Catherine has a lover, Daniel, but although they are deeply infatuated with each other they are young and not ready to settle down. In the summer holidays, before school starts again, Catherine has taken a cleaning job in the house where a visiting American, Emily Hale, is staying. Emily is visited from time to time by her ‘special friend’ Tom, who is, as scholars of modernist literature will no doubt have realised already, the poet T.S. Eliot.

The two couples cross paths, and Emily takes Catherine under her wing. Catherine is flattered at being considered one of Miss Hale’s ‘girls’, and sympathetic to the romantic hopes and disappointments experienced by her new mentor, although this sympathy, and Miss Hale’s reciprocal feelings towards her own rather more trivial difficulties, lead her into a couple of rather awkward situations.

In my review of The Time We Have Taken, I wrote, ‘Carroll’s achievement is quite extraordinary in its subtlety and poise. His style could easily lapse into tedium and self-parody, but he sustains the most delicate balance throughout these three novels, a feat which holds the reader mesmerised to the end.’ I’m afraid that in The
Lost Life, the balance has tipped and the spell no longer holds. The psychological insight is as acute, and the characterization is still exact, but many of the extended, meditative passages with their repetitions and parenthetic interruptions, so effective in the earlier books, now seem mannered. The description of Eliot as ‘a cathedral on legs’ has too much in common with the description of Gough Whitlam in the earlier novels. And the problem of the tobacco tin containing the secret of the middle-aged lovers, which Daniel steals as a prank and which Catherine cannot bring herself to return to Emily, is puzzling: it seems to belong to a different, more predictable kind of novel, the kind driven by plot devices.

The Lost Life is nevertheless very readable and its references to Eliot’s poem ‘Burnt Norton’, from which it springs, are intriguing. The poem begins:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past,

which might as well be Carroll’s artistic motto. It’s a pleasant book, with a sweetly melancholic flavour, but misses out on the magnificence of the earlier trilogy.