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

***Infidelity* by Hugh Mackay. Macmillan, 2013.**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 1.11.14.

I must admit Hugh Mackay is new to me as a novelist. It's unusual to find an author with his profile as a social researcher and commentator conducting a second career as a novelist – *Infidelity* is his sixth novel – but as a reader it's probably better to try and forget that he is the author of non-fiction books such as *The Good Life: What Makes a Life Worth Living* and *What makes us tick: the ten desires that drive us*. No novel benefits by being read, at least at first, for its message.

*Infidelity* concerns a romance between Tom, a recently-divorced Australian psychologist, footloose in London, under a cloud after a sexual involvement with a patient in his Sydney practice, and a wealthy English woman, an academic who specialises in the interpretation of nursery rhymes. It is not until he is deeply in love that he discovers that Sarah has a husband. Perry is the source of her wealth but is by all accounts (and we hear several) a manipulative and unpleasant man, and, to complicate things further, is slowly dying of motor neurone disease. Although Sarah insists that the marriage is a sham, she still travels to the country to spend time with him every weekend. Thus Tom is presented with a dilemma, one which he ponders but which engages him rather less than the jealousies and insecurities arising from his complicated entanglement with Sarah.

Tom is the narrator of this novel. Some of the chapters are headed with a date, diary-fashion. The first, for instance, is 'London, 22 January.' I don't have the impression, though, that it is intended to be a diary-style narrative. There are too many signposts to what will come. The very first sentence of the book is 'Some moments remain locked in the memory, vividly and forever; they are often beginnings or endings.' Thus is introduced his meeting with Sarah, at the Royal Academy in London. A sentence with such significant freight doesn't belong in a journal entry. So I think we must assume that Tom the narrator is looking back at the events of these few months from some future time. Nevertheless, the story has an immediate tug, and Mackay is good at getting the reader's attention and sympathy.

Tom is a knowing but in some ways a naïve narrator. Mackay introduces contrary voices of warning in several ways. Perhaps the first of these, for the alert reader, is the epigraph from Auden: 'Certainty, fidelity/on the stroke of midnight pass/like vibrations of a bell'. The very intensity of his feelings for Sarah, set against the practicalities of the situation, also tends to highlight the danger he is in, and makes us fear for him. And then there are his friends, and Sarah's, available to provide counter-voices to what becomes our fervent empathy with this rather sweet, highly intellectual but sometimes slightly dim man.

If I have a criticism of this extremely engaging novel, it is that there are too many 'significance bombs' ticking away. After a meeting with a colleague when they have discussed their respective love-lives, they step out into the rain with the comment, 'I don't think this is going to let up'. Quite clever. Perhaps I was reading too critically, but I think there is something in the narrative which encourages that kind of reading. A trip to York seems designed for no narrative purpose other than to allow for a meditation of the meanings of fidelity and faith, for example. And the habit of inserting parenthetical statements about clinical psychology and the ethics of air travel only irritates without contributing much in the way of character or plot development.

All this notwithstanding, I enjoyed *Infidelity*. It is a highly literate novel, rather than 'literary' or experimental in the dull or difficult sense. It's well-written and extremely readable, and charts the history of an intense love affair with empathy and sensitivity.