
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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In 1994, Queensland author Jay Verney published her first novel *A Mortality Tale*. This novel has now been published again by University of Queensland Press in a companion volume to her new novel *Percussion*.

These novels have much in common – even one of the characters. Verney’s world is peopled by retrenched public servants and the families of small-town publicans from sub-tropical Queensland. Separation, divorce and violent death are disturbingly frequent events.

The first novel was a critical success. It made the shortlist for Australia’s two major prizes, and it deserved to. *A Mortality Tale* is in fact a morality tale. Carmen, the first-person narrator, is the driver in a hit and run accident. She gets away with it, and the novel’s tension springs from her internal debate about whether or not she should give herself up. Like any good novelist, Verney has clothed her moral dilemma with a thousand little circumstances which can be weighed in the argument either way. Against her, the victim is a young man, a close friend of her niece, part of a large family and so on. In her favour, he was drunk and possibly stoned, he was standing in the middle of the road during a blackout, possibly inviting an accident, she could have done nothing to prevent his death. Owning up would invite revenge, not justice, and would achieve nothing but a few years in what Carmen’s brother bracingly refers to as ‘the metal motel’. The longer she leaves it to make her confession, the worse it will
be for her and the more reason she has to keep quiet. She retires to her family’s pub in the sub-tropical north to nurse her conscience, and her new baby.

_**A Mortality Tale**_ is taut and convincing. Carmen is not entirely likeable and Verney leaves it open to readers to make up their own minds, but there is enough interest in the dilemma, and sympathy for Carmen’s predicament, to keep the pages turning.

_**Percussion**_ is set in the region near the town where Carmen now lives with her baby son Vic. Oddly Carmen has kept the same name in the new novel, while all the towns are called something different. In _**Percussion**_, Carmen provides the love-interest for the main character, Anna Maher. Anna, like Carmen, is a former public servant and the daughter of an alcoholic publican.

The plot of the second novel is at once more complicated and less dramatic. The action is spread over four generations of the Maher family. Anna, her mother and her grandmother travel to California for a reunion of American second-world-war servicemen and their Australian wives. Meanwhile, the remaining members of the family are struggling through the heat and stress of the festive season back in Queensland. After the tight focus of _**A Mortality Tale**_, _**Percussion**_ feels a little flabby. Verney takes many meandering nostalgic byways on her way to the climax of Anna’s grandmother Veronica’s sudden death on the LA streets. At critical moments, Anna flashes back to childhood memories which, however meaningful, are unwanted distractions from the drama. Even technically, the narrative is fragmented: Anna narrates most, but not all, of the action she is involved in, and the rest is in the third person.

Verney’s style is usually direct and hardboiled. But, especially in the earlier novel, she has a way of getting carried away with her imagery,
occasionally tangling her metaphors to the point of incoherence. Both novels are worth reading, perceptive and thoughtful, though *A Mortality Tale* is the better of the two. *Percussion* suffers from too many characters jostling for our attention: too much detail and not enough plot.