Seeing George is ‘a fairytale for adults’ by Cassandra Austin – not a recently discovered work by Jane’s big sister: this Cassandra Austin is a first-time Australian novelist, 200 years younger than her namesake.

The George of the title is a dragon – oddly, named after the famous dragon-slayer. You would think he would find it convenient that most of the people he lives among in Melbourne in the 1950s don’t see him as a dragon, but as a man. But he is lonely and disconsolate until he meets a young woman, Violet, whose reaction of horror gratifies his sense of self: she sees him in his true colours – green and purple scales, tail, fiery breath and all. Violet is not so delighted, however, and with reason. Her marriage is already proving a little troublesome, and she doesn’t need the extra complication of a lovesick dragon, who looks like a normal man to her husband, hanging around and claiming her attention. She, and others, begin to have doubts about her sanity.

Like all stories of this type, the reader needs to be aware of the rules of this world. George seems to have few special powers, though like other mythical creatures he is extremely long-lived. There is a whole convention of creatures – unicorns and so on – who hold council meetings, appropriately, in Port Fairy on the south coast of Victoria. As readers, we are required to suspend disbelief and go along with George and Violet’s conviction that dragons exist in this prosaic world. Thousands of books and Hollywood movies have asked no less, of course. I think perhaps the difficulty in this case is that the scenario is a little hazy. How does George come to be in this place and time? How do dragons come to exist in the first place? The background is never satisfactorily sketched in.

Austin has made a valiant attempt to depict the reality of Violet’s everyday life, however. The novel is structured in 31 alternating chapters, one from Violet’s old age, the next from the time when, at the age of nineteen, she first encounters George. The elderly Violet is dying of cancer, after 53 years of marriage to Frank. Their life together
is painstakingly described – her infirmity and reluctant dependence on crusty, uncommunicative Frank. Despite their difficulties, however, there is affection still.

Austin makes a few errors in her description of life in the 1950s. There were no splades or hot chocolate frappes in Victoria of the time, and cling wrap was an invention of later times – hard now to imagine life without it, but my sandwiches were wrapped in greaseproof paper until well into the 1970s. Austin’s editor should have picked up these details, as well as the clanger ‘gentile’ for ‘genteel’.

Nevertheless, Seeing George has many strengths, principally in the portrayal of the couple who find marriage full of stresses and strains, but ultimately worthwhile. Violet’s illness is convincing – the pain, discomfort and inconvenience portrayed without sentiment. Frank and Violet are fairly inarticulate with each other, and their difficulty in understanding each other to some extent drives the plot. But it also strings it out to the point of tedium: in the contemporary scenes, the main tension arises from Frank’s stubborn refusal to say clearly what he thinks, and Violet’s puzzlement. The ending provides an explanation but hardly a clarification.

So Seeing George is a promising first novel, but the magical aspect does not sit comfortably with the realism, and the drama is on a very small scale. The detail is well handled on the whole, but the big picture is not big enough to leave a lasting impression.