Review of *Fantastic Street* by David Kelly (Picador, 2003) recorded for

Reviewer: Gillian Dooley

David Kelly, in his first novel *Fantastic Street*, gives us an idea of the perils of
standing out or being different in a conservative society. And also, perhaps,
something of the thrills.

Kelly’s main character, Alex, spends his childhood as one of a diverse tribe of
children living in various parts of Queensland.

When I think of my siblings they come waltzing by to that song ‘Ten
Green Bottles’. The song just seems to slip into my head as the signature
tune. Except I have to change the number to eleven to suit. …

Of the siblings, myself included, three are adopted, three are fostered,
three are stepbottles and two are blood.

He was the first to be adopted, when he was a baby, and the others started to
come along when he was six or seven. His adopted parents’ marriage breaks up
and his new step-father Brian – his adopted mother’s new husband or boyfriend
– is violent, homophobic and, it turns out, abuses the girls of the family. In his
mid-teens Alex discovers that he’s gay and leaves home after a fight with Brian,
making his way after a short time to Sydney.

In 1994, at the age of 29, he returns to his mother’s home in Brisbane because
she is dying of cancer, and there is a family reunion of a sort, with a couple of
stepsisters and the twin daughters of Brian and Alex’s mother. Brian has met an
unlamented death in prison.

There is a complete absence of sentiment in this novel. His mother’s funeral is
described at the end:
We cremated her at the end of last week. That final week between Christmas and New Year. One weird week. A week in which, according to those we rang trying to organise the funeral, lots of people drop dead. …

They came and zipped Mum away in a black plastic bag. Then they carried her out to a refrigerated truck and rolled away to pick up all the others who hadn’t had the foresight to book somewhere closer. We were going to have to travel inland for about a hundred kilometres … because all the other crematoriums were booked solid.

Kelly doesn’t shirk the big issues. He confronts head-on the question of his feelings for his aboriginal foster-brothers – he loves one, dislikes the other; and his irritation and pain at his mother’s illness, as well as her earlier eccentricities, like her unreasonable expectations of the family harmony to be engendered by constantly playing Rolf Harris’ Two Little Boys to her mal-assorted and discontented children. The language is clever and often highly expressive.

But *Fantastic Street*, in spite of a lot of worthwhile and courageous elements, is ultimately a little unsatisfying. The character of Alex is flighty and often outrageous for the sake of it – he is a part-time drag queen, for example, just for fun. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but the self-conscious shock tactics seep into the narrative style. It’s very fragmented, with lots of flashing back and forward - though at least he helps the reader by heading each chapter with a time and place. The first half, where he describes with bracing honesty his erratic and chaotic childhood, is better. But overall he has not sustained the narrative steadily enough to convey much more than a superficial picture of Alex’s life. It’s a pity, because he could have excited more sympathy for his
likeable main character with less sensationalism and artifice, and more solid craftsmanship.