

Mardi McConnochie. *Fivestar*. HarperCollins, 2005.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Mardi McConnochie is clearly keen not to be typecast as a novelist. Her first, *Coldwater*, was a brooding gothic tale about a set of sisters with the same Christian names as the Brontes, living on a prison island off the east coast of Australia in the mid nineteenth century with their prison-governor father. Her second, *The Snow Queen*, was about ageing ballet dancers in Adelaide in the 1970s, and now we have *Fivestar*, a swipe at the pop music industry.

*Fivestar* begins well, with a young Sydney wannabe manager auditioning for members for a girl group. Daryl has a good instinct for what makes a star: it has a lot more to do with sex appeal than musical talent. As long as one of the five can sing, he's content. Modern production methods will take care of the rest.

We follow the five through the inevitable twists and turns of their rise to the top. Daryl is soon dumped and the girls are taken on by a television producer who is keen to get in on the ground floor of a new sensation – reality TV: this is the early nineties. The action of the television show is reproduced as a script complete with actions and camera directions, a nauseating reminder of how far from reality such programs really are. The show is a sensation and *Fivestar* is on its way to the top.

The novel is divided into 3 parts – before, during and after fame. *Fivestar* is a cautionary tale for anyone who longs to be famous and rich. 'The thing you discover when you become very famous is that there is a small and rarefied world, only

tangentially connected to the regular world, which is made up of a series of tubes and tunnels, and this is where the famous people live. ... The glamour of international travel! It means skin that is permanently dehydrated and feet that are always swollen and a digestion that's always disrupted from the cabin pressure.' And so on. The drugs, the sex, the boredom. And then the collapse.

McConnochie gives the girls each a history, though they are little more than caricatures. Except for Sam, the one who can sing, who writes her own songs and wants to be a real musician. Sam is an Adelaide girl (though strangely we don't find that out until after her pre-Fivestar story has been told. This could be intentional but feels like a careless slip.) What I constantly missed in this novel about the music industry was more about the music itself. Fivestar's music is presumably a clone of The Spice Girls', but Sam is a musician. When she sings, or when she composes, we get no feeling for what she sounds like. Is she Suzanne Vega or Renee Geyer?

There are moments when McConnochie sticks up her head and starts preaching. When Jules goes to India to film a TV special, she is appalled by what she experiences. McConnochie has a point to make, and she has set up the whole episode to do it: 'there is another kind of knowing altogether that comes from building your own house out of cardboard and hauling water from a tap a mile away every day because it is all you can do. Jules would never experience that kind of knowing.' OK, but neither will McConnochie or any of her readers. There's no need for such self-righteousness here.

*Fivestar* in the end is a predictable satire. All the cliches are trotted out, and although there is verve in the writing, there are some chronological slips in the plot which

betray carelessness and haste. McConnochie hammers her message home and little is left to the reader's imagination.