

Ilsa Evans. *Drip Dry*. Pan Macmillan, 2004.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Drip Dry* is Ilsa Evans' second novel – pretty much a re-run of the first, *Spin Cycle*. Over the course of 365 pages she recounts the events of one week, which means that each day is allocated 52 long pages.

Perhaps it's appropriate, given the title, that the book is basically the written equivalent of a TV soapie. The only other resonance of the title seems to be the narrator's recent acquisition of a new washing machine. This however is as of little deep significance as anything else in the novel. Profundity of any kind is not to be found. Melodrama, ineffective attempts at arch humour, and stereotypes are abundant. The narrator would like to convince us that she encounters some pretty extraordinary characters, but their oddness is all on the surface, like the handyman who wears bright pink overalls and speaks with a fake Irish accent, and her ex-sister-in-law, who, without being glamorous or outrageous, runs a brothel.

The moral climate of *Drip Dry* is a strange mixture of prurience and prudishness. Camilla, the narrator, is deeply shocked at herself for allowing herself an impulsive fling with her ex-husband Alex, for example, and despite liking her sister-in-law Maggie and enjoying the thrill of knowing a madam, regards her clients with disgust. She nevertheless enjoys a bit of smutty talk, happily telling her friends all about the fantastic sex with Alex, and participating enthusiastically in a suggestive group discussion at her mother's wedding. Nothing she does is examined with any sort of originality. There's a rather

revolting passage when she is comparing her ex-husband (the serious love-interest in the novel) with her sister's boyfriend who she finds 'very cute', as if choosing a man was hardly more complex a transaction than picking the best cauliflower to buy at the supermarket.

Evans's prose is verbose, cliched and not as funny as it should be. There are several 'set pieces' in the novel which could have been funny: her two ex-husbands meeting unexpectedly at her 6-year old daughter's birthday party, for example, or when she falls naked through the half-completed bathroom floor. But the playfulness is ponderous: the spark is missing and the humour never takes off. Another serious problem is repetition. Too often, an event is recounted two or more times: once directly by the narrator and then again to various other characters so they can register their astonished reactions.

So *Drip Dry* is a conscientious attempt at Life As It Happens. Every word of every conversation has to be included, to the reader's considerable frustration. And like everything else in the book, the narrator's self-deprecation is superficial: Camilla gives the impression that she is, in spite of her three wonderful children, utterly self-absorbed, and this without any hint of irony, since the narrator is indistinguishable from the author. It may be, as the back cover proclaims, that 'women everywhere will relate to this tale,' but this could only be at the shallowest level: just as much as might be expected from a book which begins, 'If men had periods...'