In 2000 and 2001, Tom Mann spent more than seven months, over the period of a year, as an education officer at Woomera Detention Centre. With only two other staff, he was responsible for all the teaching which went on at the Centre, including English classes for the adults as well as basic education for children of all ages. In his first stint in late 2000 there were only about 250 refugees, which represents merely an extremely difficult task. When he went back later for a six-month contract in 2001, there were up to 2000 people, and with few extra resources available it became nearly impossible to offer tuition to everyone who wanted it, much less to actively encourage those who were depressed and discouraged to attend classes.

Tom Mann has now written a book, Desert Sorrow: Asylum Seekers at Woomera. He offers many unexpected insights into life at the detention centre. One of these is the part the refugees themselves were able to play in teaching. Many of them were well-educated, with good English, and were paid the princely sum of one dollar an hour – the maximum they were allowed to earn – for helping with the teaching. Without their help any teaching would have been virtually impossible. It was difficult for them to provide more than an hour’s contact time each day even for the school-aged children. To add to the difficulties, the administration decided at one stage to shift the refugees between the different compounds within the Centre where they were confined, depending upon the progress of their applications. Mann says, ‘teaching became a nightmare with these new movements. Often there was disruption with too many children or adults coming into the classrooms. Children especially liked to form working friendships and settle into a pattern of activities in a classroom. All that went
by the board.’ A small number of computers were provided for the refugees to use, but
the demand was so great that the strict rationing sometimes led to violent incidents.

Another illumination is the fact, obvious if one gives it any thought, that these
refugees were not one homogenous group. Ethnic, religious and linguistic rivalries
survived the gruelling journeys these people had undertaken. Most of the refugees at
this time were from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, as we know. Many were Muslim, but
some, of course, were Sunni and some were Shiite. Some were Christian. Particularly
poignant were the cases where these rivalries affected the success of their visa
applications. For example, the Sabian Mandeans, a sect of followers of John the
Baptist who suffered persecution in Iran, and whose English was not adequate for
official interviews, had to rely on Muslim fellow-detainees as interpreters and could
not always rely on their impartiality. Consequently many of these families were
rejected and sent back to Iran. Subtleties like these are apparently invisible to the
bureaucracy in Canberra.

Underlying all the difficulties faced by these people in daily life was the
opaque process of their claims for asylum. Contact with the outside world was, as we
know, extremely restricted. Many applicants had no news of their progress for months.
The decisions which were made seemed incomprehensible: the staff at the Centre had
no better idea of who would succeed than the detainees themselves. Often it seemed to
come down to matters of producing exactly the right words at the right time, and only
the lucky ones could know what they were.

This is an important book, and only someone like Tom Mann was in a position
to write it. So I wish I could say it was a well-written and readable book. However, the
stark facts Mann has to communicate have their own power to cut through his rather
dull and cliched prose. These unfortunate people upon whose impossibly troubled
heads our federal government has felt it necessary to heap even more grief could
perhaps have had a more eloquent advocate, but we must be grateful, I suppose, that
they were allowed an advocate at all.