
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

Broadcast on 27 May 2002

The jacket blurb for Pat Lowe’s novel *Feeling the Heat* calls it ‘edgy and unpredictable’. I was thus led to expect something a little more sensational and hard-edged than this very likable but rather low key novel.

*Feeling the Heat* is packaged as ‘Young Adult Fiction’ – for children 14 plus. It would be a pity if this put older adults off, though, since it is a sensitively written book dealing with subjects all Australians might find compelling – issues of race and belonging and growing up in Australian society. The hero, Matthew, is a young man of 19 or 20, but this should make him no less interesting to a wide range of readers, since it’s an age when people start taking control of their own lives and a lot tends to happen; and I rather regret the marketing priorities which have led to this type of segmentation of the reading public.

The main clue to the ‘Young Adult’ pitch of the novel is the otherwise puzzling silence on the subject of sex. Sex having been a taboo subject in literature for so long, it is now quite odd to read a new novel which skirts the issue quite as shyly as this one does. Matthew returns to a town in the Kimberley where he lived with his parents as a child, seeking the aboriginal girl, Frances, he had befriended back then, clearly with romantic aims. Although Frances is pregnant to another man when he finds her, he becomes accepted by the family as her ‘husband’, and begins to sleep with her, but apart from ‘a surge
of fierce protectiveness’ and ‘unshed tears of joy’, a veil is drawn over the
details.

Shortly after he arrives in the town, Matthew is the only witness to the
death of a man taken by a crocodile. What tension there is in the story is
provided by this incident and the inquest arising from it. But it is curiously
undramatic. There doesn’t seem to be any real danger that Matthew will be
blamed for the man’s death – and he isn’t. Other potentially dramatic incidents
occur: Matthew has a scuffle with the father of Frances’ baby, but there are no
serious consequences. He offends a local station owner who has offered him a
job by borrowing his vehicle without permission, but is forgiven and ends up
working for him after all.

The novel’s best qualities are not in its drama, but in the naturalness of
its picture of everyday life in this small coastal community in north-western
Australia. The characterisations are excellent. Matthew is rather callow but
learns from his experiences. The aboriginal characters are drawn with sympathy
and no sentimentality. They have strong but matter-of-fact ties of family and
culture. Matthew has to accept that he will never entirely understand them.

Roy, the father of Frances’ baby, seems willing to surrender Frances to
Matthew, but Matthew is mystified by the way he goes about it. Roy makes his
announcement at dinner with Matthew, Frances and her father, Ajax:

‘Your daughter got another husband,’ remarked Roy as they were
finishing their meal.

Ajax looked at Matthew. ‘True?’ he said. ‘I got a kartiya son-in-
law now?’
Matthew turned out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

‘That’s what Roy reckons,’ he said. ‘I don’t know about Frances.’ He tried to catch her eye, but she was studying her plate, smiling to herself. He took her smile for quiet consent.

Roy turned to Matthew. ‘I gotta fight you, give you belting with a boomerang.’ He didn’t sound serious and Matthew took it that Roy was just explaining the rules.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘That’s the law for blackfellas.’

‘You can’t belt a kartiya blackfella way!’ put in Frances. ‘Police will get you.’

Matthew can never get Frances to respond when he presses her with questions of love and commitment, and eventually, when the baby is born, Matthew realises that Roy will always be around with his prior claim as father of the baby, and that he does not belong with Frances. That doesn’t stop him deciding to stay and work on the station, rather than returning to Perth as his parents would like him to.

*Feeling the Heat* is an engaging novel of small-town life in an isolated community, with believable characters and a deep feeling for a landscape many would find harsh. It is unpredictable in the same way life is unpredictable – things don’t always work out the way you expect them to, but surprises can be accommodated and life goes on. It’s no thriller, but it has a depth of lived experience which thrillers never aspire to, and I would recommend it not only to teenagers or young adults, but to anyone who enjoys a mature and thoughtful story in an unusual setting.