Deep Waters, Andiee Paviour’s second novel, is the tale of a mismatched couple who fail their only son. It’s about the damage done by dysfunctional families.

Carolyn McCall is herself an only child. Her father is a famous surgeon with Jekyll and Hyde overtones: a bully at home and a charming celebrity to the world. Escaping the horrors of home, Carolyn finds work as a barmaid in a Double Bay pub, where at nineteen she is spotted by the larger-than-life Big Bill Faraday, twice her age and a more public bully than her father. He is a television celebrity specialising in ‘the “walk-in”, guerrilla-style interview’. Their wedding is a tasteless media event, in which Carolyn’s barmaid past is airbrushed out in favour of her impeccable family background. This a foretaste of the years to come. Carolyn is forced into the mold of celebrity wife, lumbered with a set of ‘bestgirlfriends’ who have nothing but their husbands’ careers in common. She tries to find work, but two years as a barmaid is no preparation for the types of jobs suitable for a media celebrity’s wife. She is left with nothing but a helpless love for her ever more distant son to compensate for the vapidity of her existence.

The most striking thing about Deep Waters is its anger. The satire is bitter and biting: from her father, ‘sanctified as a healer by his adoring public, … a fascist with the power of God in whom she could no longer believe. And just try running that one by the sourpuss principal of St Mary Immaculate College … who doted with a miserly passion on Dr McCall’s every substantial donation,’ to her friend Bindi Waterson-Downe, with
‘her blank, pastel eyes and sugary starlet’s ways,’ an example of ‘the exhausting vivacity of the clingy corporate wife, for whom force of will is the only means of trade. Without their lords and masters, in other words, these lazy-arsed lushes would be all alone in a financially withholding world.’ And her husband Big Bill, whose signature phrase, ‘Do you seriously expect me to believe’ was ‘directed with menacing zeal at every sleaze he nailed on the air. “Do you seriously expect me to believe,” he would snarl, inches from the twitching face of that night’s cowering low-life, “that you, an African-American transsexual man, are the biological father of these Korean triplets?”’

The crisis comes when young Billy, a fierce disappointment to his father with his ‘mama’s boy’ ways, walks away from this mess at the age of sixteen, forcing his mother to rethink her whole existence. She begins searching for him in the seediest areas of Sydney, and before long she leaves Big Bill and the vacuous luxury of their Palm Beach house for the freedom of her former barmaid existence. Whether or not she finds Billy is uncertain, but she finds a satisfying occupation, working for a drop-in centre in Darlinghurst.

The mood of the book softens as Carolyn’s life becomes more purposeful, and even Big Bill, after a spectacular fall from grace brought about by bewilderment at Carolyn’s desertion, manages to reinvent himself as a spokesman for the dispossessed on a thinly-veiled equivalent of SBS. Carolyn really turns the corner when she finally realises what the reader has seen all along: that Billy is repeating her own unhappy childhood.

Paviour’s satire is a sharp instrument wielded skilfully for the most part, though sometimes she wavers – a woman who has an ‘ample bottom’ in one scene transmutes
into a harridan with ‘one hand on her bony hip’ just a few pages later. But along with the venom, there is a passionate voice pleading on behalf of all mistreated children, and that is what makes this book worth reading.