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This is the author’s radio script of this article.


*The True Story of Butterfish* is, the media release proclaims, ‘Nick Earls’ highly anticipated first novel for adults in five years.’ This description piques my chronic querulous streak: what makes a novel like this more suitable for adults than what are these days known as ‘young adults’ – that is, what used to be called teenagers?

Butterfish is a recently dissolved pop band, formed in Brisbane by two young men, Curtis Holland and Derek Frick. (It is not, we are assured in the Acknowledgements, based on Savage Garden.) Butterfish has had its moment of improbable world-wide success with its first two albums, but the third flopped and the dream is over. Curtis, the first-person narrator of this novel, has bought a house in the Brisbane suburbs, leaving Derek to his clichéd fate as an ageing disintegrating unemployed celebrity in LA. Derek was always more interested in the lifestyle, while Curtis was in it for the music.

*The True Story of Butterfish* is an unusually restrained book. In this kind of novel the narrator usually stumbles through life, messing up along the way, till something – love, music, or a close shave with death – saves him from himself at the last possible moment. But Curtis, though rather self-deprecating and as self-conscious about his looks as any fourteen-year-old girl, is, we soon come to realise, a remarkably together guy. He is actually someone you could trust alone with your lovestruck sixteen-year-old daughter. Though he enjoys the occasional Stella Artois, he shows no inclination to get wrecked on drink and drugs. He works steadily on the album he’s producing for a Norwegian band in his backyard studio, makes progress with re-establishing a bond with his brother Patrick, who was dropped from the band before they made it big. Even this isn’t the sore point it might have been and any little resentments are soon sorted out. And the arrival of Derek for a short stay fails to derail the promising relationship he’s developing with his neighbour Kate, a single mother with two teenage kids.

It might be rather tame, but *The True Story of Butterfish* is still a most enjoyable read. Curtis is a really nice guy – intelligent, honest and witty – and it’s actually very refreshing that he doesn’t have to go through all the usual pratfalls and agonies in the cause of narrative dynamics. The other characters are well-rounded and
plausible. The two teenagers are especially good – Earls obviously knows his adolescents well. Mark, especially, manipulative and acne-ridden at the unlovable age of fourteen, is strangely attractive.

*The True Story of Butterfish* has been written concurrently as a play and this explains much about it. Earls said in an interview that he’s sure that has made it a better novel. I’m not sure, but it has made it more like a play. The dialogue is the cleverest thing about it. Everyone is witty and articulate. There is a small number of characters – you’d only need six actors. And a soundtrack would add an extra dimension: music is a constant presence in the book.

But what this novel feels most like is an old-fashioned *bildungsroman*, a coming of age novel. Though Curtis is thirty-five, he’s like a teenager growing up, with his unhappy body image, uncertainty about his future and unresolved relationships. ‘I felt as if I had turned sixteen in my mid-twenties’, he thinks, and a remark from Kate makes him realise, ‘I hadn’t grown up enough to think about children.’ So what makes this a novel for adults rather than younger readers? There’s nothing about it that would disturb the innocence of the young – in fact the younger characters are easily as worldly as the adults. It has a clear and uncontroversial message about what’s important in life. Maybe at 280 pages it’s too long for the average under-eighteen, which is an alarming thought; but then again the latest Harry Potter is much longer. The main character isn’t a teenager, but he could hardly alienate or even surprise a younger reader. My suspicion is that these categories are little more than marketing ploys.

I enjoyed reading *The True Story of Butterfish*. It didn’t change my life, challenge my thinking or really surprise me in any way, but I have nothing but pleasant recollections of it, and I might even go and see the play if it comes my way. And I’d recommend it to anyone over the age of twelve.