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

*Black Dust Dancing*. Tracy Crisp. Wakefield Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 7 August 2009.

Adelaide's Tracy Crisp has set her first novel in a fictional town very like Port Pirie, and though she is also a standup comedian as well as a writer, *Black Dust Dancing* is really no laughing matter.

The novel centres around two women. Caro is a doctor, the widow of Sean, a man from Port Joseph who has recently died, quite young, from an unspecified disease, in their Adelaide home. Caro has decided to move to Port Joseph with her fifteen-year-old daughter, to work in a general practice there and to try to develop a better relationship with her husband's family, especially her mother-in-law Libby.

Heidi is younger, in her early twenties. She is about to marry into the same family. Her fiancé, Joel, is Sean's much younger brother. She lives with her father, since her mother abandoned them years ago, and her four-year-old son Zac, the result of an unplanned teenage pregnancy. At the beginning of the novel she and Zac are returning from an uncomfortable holiday with her mother in Queensland. Persuaded by her mother that Zac is not as healthy as he could be, Heidi consults Caro, who discovers that the boy's lead levels are dangerously high.

The people in this small town don't give up their secrets lightly, and silence is a lead weight in the closest of relationships. The narrative often proceeds by means of extended descriptions of the trivia of life – a trip to the hairdressers, a day spent doing housework – with a telling sentence or two dropped into the flow of banalities.

Reading *Black Dust Dancing* is a little like being at a large family gathering where you hardly know anyone and no-one introduces you. Nothing is ever explained,

and we only find out about relationships – and they are tense and complicated in this small town – by eavesdropping on conversations and drawing implications from the thought processes of the two main characters. For example, it seems probable that Sean’s illness is the same disease that is killing Zac’s grandfather, and it seems possible that it is linked to the high lead levels in the town, but nobody ever actually says that. And there’s an Auntie Barb who was on the scene after Heidi’s mother left, but we don’t find out whether she was a real aunt, or whether Heidi’s obvious but muted resentment of her was caused by an attempt to introduce a mother-substitute. I assume that Crisp is firmly wedded to the creative writing dogma of ‘show don’t tell’, and though I don’t believe that creative writing necessarily has to follow these rules, and that any such rules can stifle creativity, it’s actually a highly effective technique in Crisp’s hands, because it engages the intellect as well as the emotions.

*Black Dust Dancing* could appear to be a fairly simple morality tale about the conflict between loyalty and making a principled stand. But it’s surprisingly deep and its economy and the lucidity of its language are stunning when you consider the complexities it contains.