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

You don’t so much read an Emily Maguire novel as get sucked up and spat out at the end, with all your moral certitudes shaken. *Smoke in the Room* is her third novel, and while it is not quite as much of a threat to all the beliefs our society is based upon as her first, *Taming the Beast*, it will not allow you to escape unscathed.

Katie Lewis lives in a flat owned by her grandmother, who is her only viable relative – her mother having decamped and started a new family in another city. In her mid-twenties, she is difficult: beset by bipolar mental illness, she is on Sydney’s rental blacklist and her last co-tenant left in an ambulance after things got out of hand one night. The new flatmate, chosen by her grandmother, is Adam, an American who seems unexceptionable to the grandmother. Katie is not so sure: she thinks at first he might be a nut-job or a Mormon, until she falls in love, and into bed, with him.

Adam, though unable or unwilling to resist Katie’s insistent advances, is paralysed with grief at the death of his wife and doesn’t really take in much about her. He notices some things:

> She read *Famous* magazine but not the newspaper. She hardly showered and seemed to think that resting your clothes on the floor for a couple of days was as good as washing them. She was comfortable climbing into bins and eating whatever decaying crap she pulled out even though she had never heard of freeganism or the Wasteless Society Movement. (174)

She also can’t sleep and intentionally cuts and burns herself when she’s off her medication. It takes a suicide attempt to make Adam wake up to her precarious state and try to help her.

Meanwhile, the cash-strapped grandmother has let the third bedroom to Graeme, an aid worker with an agenda of his own. Graeme is older than the other two but forms a friendship with Katie deeper than their frenetic sexual bond. Adam can’t understand what on earth Graeme sees in her:

> ‘She’s not exactly the world’s most erudite –’
> ‘Erudite! … Listen, mate, if you’ve spent time talking to her and still don’t get why someone would want her as a friend, then she isn’t the one with the problem.’ (175)

Graeme is onto something: Katie, with all her damage and bad behaviour, is both endearing and bright. She also understands Graeme better than anyone else. She realises what he is planning. She knows that all his charitable work can’t solve the bleak view of life they share, the depressive view that she suspects, in spite of all the counselling she’s endured, is actually the realistic view. ‘The stuff of life was all distraction, and distraction allowed her to get on with the stuff of life. But nobody stays distracted. The song ends and the man sleeps and the alcohol wears off and there it is; the window, the truck, the bread knife in its stay-sharp sheath’ (160).

*Smoke in the Room* – the enigmatic title taken from Epictetus – is full of ideas and insights but makes no attempt to prove a point. These three people are thrown together for a time, before their paths diverge again, something is gained and something lost. Edgy, intelligent and funny as its heroine, this novel will disturb you, but you will not fail to be entranced and entertained in the process.