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This is the author's radio script of this article
After the Fire, A Still Small Voice, Evie Wyld’s first novel, is concerned with the silent psychological after-effects of jungle warfare. Leon is a Vietnam conscript, whose father, a Dutch migrant, having volunteered for the Korean War to prove his loyalty to Australia, had returned alienated and emotionally shattered. The trouble Leon has readjusting to civilian life on his return from Vietnam is briefly allayed by marriage with his childhood sweetheart and the birth of their son, Frank. But his wife dies in a car accident and he takes dubious comfort in the arms of a series of unsavoury females. The narrative alternates between the two sons, Frank and Leon, chapter by chapter, as Frank slowly learns to deal with his anger at his father’s betrayal of his mother’s memory and his own girlfriend’s desertion, and we follow Leon’s childhood and wartime ordeals.

There is much to admire in this novel. The characters are well-drawn, and there is a clear-eyed realism about the relationships. Leon and his father are bakers and their work is carefully and lovingly described. The adult Frank’s friendship with the seven-year-old Sal is charming without being either creepy or corny. But there’s also a muddy feeling about the book. Part of the trouble may be that the two young male protagonists – father and son – are not distinguished clearly enough. And I couldn’t make the chronology fit – though his age is never clear, it seems Leon would be too old to be a Vietnam conscript. Some of the dialogue, especially between the male characters, is unconvincingly blokey. And the language can be clumsy: ‘He shook himself clean like a sheet with a swim.’ That’s a maddening sentence: what on earth’s a sheet with a swim? You don’t have to be a stickler for grammar to object to such lazy syntax. Overall, After the Fire... is uneven: too long and dense, but with some breathtaking moments.