This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Wendy James has impressed critics with her previous novels and short stories, and her new novel promises intrigue and drama. In *Where Have You Been*, a woman answers a lawyer’s advertisement, to claim her inheritance. Karen Brown has been missing for twenty years, and her younger sister, Susan, eight at the time of her sister’s disappearance, is the only surviving close relative. Is this woman Karen? She passes all the tests she is confronted with, and Susan, though she has grown up with the belief that Karen is dead, accepts, after initial doubts, that she is.

Susan is married to Ed, and they have two beautiful children and a contented suburban life. The prodigal sister, who now calls herself Carly, has had a difficult but bohemian and unfettered kind of life. In an impetuous moment of foolish generosity, Ed invites Carly to come and stay with them, live with them as long as she likes. There are, naturally, consequences, some more predictable than others. Suffice it to say that the comfortable existence they had taken for granted is disrupted and irrevocably changed by this course of events.

*Where Have You Been* could have been a rather delicious satire on the suburban lifestyle. Ed, in particular, has a great deal of comic potential:

> Ed tries always to be firm but fair. He is determined that his children will never have any cause for complaint (or lawsuits), that when they look back over their childhood they will remember (and appreciate) this as being both a happy and enriching time. Firm but fair.

He is quite ridiculously upbeat – the glass is always half full with Ed:

> Like many long-married couples, Ed and Susan have stopped talking … It’s almost as if there’s nothing more to know. Ed realises that this is what most marriages come to – and that it is, if you stop to think about it, one of the really good things about a long-time partnership. The growing ease of the relationship. Becoming Darby and Joan.
However, after a taut and promising beginning, the novel shades into melodrama rather than satire. On page 179 Susan ‘wonders, really wonders, who she is’. On page 180, ‘all of a sudden she isn’t quite sure who she is.’ Both sentences are set off in a single paragraph for dramatic effect. This is either carelessness or an inept attempt at emphasis. The free indirect discourse, too, starts getting irritating, with repetitive verbal tics like the insertion of ‘well’ or ‘oh’, like: ‘Susan is the only woman he’s ever slept with. Oh, he’d come close a few times…’ This kind of thing only really works if it’s used sparingly so it operates under the reader’s radar. Once it becomes noticeable, it starts feeling like a TV soap. The façade of Ed and Susan’s marriage, complete with standard in-law problems, is too obviously a setup designed to be demolished by the merest disturbance. Unfortunately, Where Have You Been feels inauthentic, schematic and facile, disappointing after the intelligence and thoughtfulness of James’ last novel, The Steele Diaries.