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Barry Divola. *Nineteen Seventysomething*. Affirm Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, recorded 8 May 2010.

The novel made up of linked short stories is a well-established form, with notable examples like Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, and Tim Winton's *The Turning*. Barry Divola's new book, *Nineteen Seventysomething*, follows in this tradition, with his young male narrator moving through a 1970s adolescence, encountering girls (desirable and otherwise), oddballs and misfits, and one idiosyncratic old lady, in and around his archetypal Sydney suburb. He argues over World Championship Wrestling with his contrary grandfather, plays in a band tastefully named 'Vaguely Autistic', and discovers intriguing neighbourhood secrets on his milk run. He has the standard desperate longings for the female sex, translated occasionally into fumbling encounters and awkward exchanges. Church youth groups provide the setting for several stories. The monotonous preaching of the minister's son sets off a reflection on the 1970s version of Jesus:

There wasn't a lot of fire and brimstone in this brand new Jesus. He liked to wander the countryside and hang out with regular people, and maybe sing a few tunes accompanied by an acoustic guitar. He didn't want to ruin everyone's trip. ... he was rugged but friendly, a big brother for teenage guys, something more for teenage girls. He was the Man. And he was the ultimate hippy.

The soundtrack of the 70s runs in the background: 'spangly guitars and flim-flammy drums and sweetened strings. Glam rock and slick pop and teenybop and schlocky ballads,' until an older friend gives him a Beatles tape, 'some real music,' to show him 'where all that crap came from'.

There are many pleasures in *Nineteen Seventysomething*. The humour is dry and self-deprecating; the prose is lucid and direct, well-flavoured with the vernacular of its time and place. If the subject matter sometimes feels a little predictable, it is at least presented with freshness and a light touch. And if *Nineteen Seventysomething* is not a significant or groundbreaking work – rather slight and not especially memorable – it's still charming in a laconic way, and eminently readable.