Ethel Turner’s *Seven Little Australians*, first published in 1894, gave us good, clean, uncomplicated family life in the Australian bush. There was tragedy, yes, but everyone behaved well. It was no-one’s fault.

Now, 110 years later, Eva Sallis presents us with an updated version. The number of children is the same, and they live in something like the Bush. But there the resemblance ends. While we leave Ethel Turner’s little world with a happy tear and a sigh, Eva Sallis’s inspires confusion and disturbance.

Acantia, the pathological earth-mother in *Fire Fire*, is one of fiction’s most blistering portrayals of the harm human beings can do to those closest to them, all the while claiming the high moral ground. In encounters with everyone from school inspectors and doctors to her own children, Acantia spits venom. Meanwhile, the garden, the pets and the farmyard animals all die of neglect and misadventure.

As the novel begins, Acantia with her husband A. Hartmut Houdini, a famous German viola player, and their five children move to an eccentric, salt-damp infested house in the hills near a city called Toggenberg – so obviously Adelaide that the pseudonym hardly seems worth while. Two more babies are born in the house, in the absence of the ‘toxins’ (medicine), interference (medical attention) and basic cleanliness most women find essential for childbirth. A painter, Acantia’s artistic temperament not only prevents her from showing normal maternal feelings, but also has that common, but paradoxical, effect of reducing her surroundings to chaotic filth.
Fire is a central image. Twice the house is threatened by fire, firstly in the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983. A second fire destroys the house some years later. But the pervasive atmosphere in the book is cold, claustrophobic and damp. ‘In winter the grass, the mud, the clothes, the people, the walls and the beds were cold. The fire, the cats and the fresh cow pats were warm. Everything was wet. They loved the fire, fought over the cats and stood barefoot in cow pats.’

The book is narrated in the third person, but the point of view gradually settles on Ursula, the third child. Ursula’s feelings towards her whole family, but especially her mother, are ambivalent, guilty, loving and fearful. Mysteries remain unresolved: Ursula never really understands what made her parents decide to retreat from the world. In childhood, she had thought it odd: ‘It was the retreat that troubled Ursula, not the world.’ The children speculate about the reason, but never absolutely find out what Acantia is hiding from. One thing they are sure of, though, is that her outlandish views are nothing but bravado. Her husband, large and henpecked, escapes from life by assiduously practising his viola for concerts he will never give.

*Fire* is a haunting book – not hauntingly beautiful, but full of fetid, morbid and powerful images which will stay, perhaps uncomfortably, in the mind.