When I reached page two hundred of Dianne Blacklock’s novel *Call Waiting*, with another two hundred and something still to go, I decided to try an experiment. I wrote down a prediction of how it would end. This is what I wrote: ‘Ally would settle with Matt (marriage or not) working with him as an interior decorator, and Meg would be led into some dangerous situation with Jamie and would be snapped back to the reality of her love for her husband and child, and maybe would change her job.’

I don’t want to spoil the ending for all Blacklock’s prospective readers, but I have to report that my predictions were pretty well spot on.

*Call Waiting* is not a novel for those who are looking for surprises, or who dislike happy endings. It is an unashamed romance, with an orphaned heroine, bodice-ripping love scenes, and a healthy dose of contempt for city living and a prejudice in favour of the rural life – not the outback, just the safe area around Bowral, not too far from Sydney and shopping.

Ally and Meg, her friend from art college, are both in a rut with their men and their city careers. They both end up living the dream life of the yuppie dropout – Meg and her husband running a country art gallery, Ally joining her new man Matt in his building business, as an interior designer. Matt is a real man, who wears overalls and sometimes works without his shirt on, while her former boyfriend Bryce was in real estate and spent more time on his beauty routines than she did. Meg’s perfect marriage-and-child package is nearly
destroyed by her flirtation with the feckless and irresistible Jamie. The cliches abound. There are a lot of cute scenes with Meg’s adorable toddler, who of course is rushed to hospital the very night Meg is off nearly having her wild irresponsible fling.

The writing is sometimes too cute for its own good as well. What can you say about a line like “Matt grinned. She smiled back at him. The tension that had crept into the conversation had just excused itself for interrupting and crept quietly back out.” There is too much of the “Nic enthused” and “Ally insisted” and “Matt explained.” And boy, they drink a lot of chardonnay and champagne! If there’s a message or a moral, it must be that heterosexual love conquers all – there is a pivotal moment when Ally learns that Matt’s ex-wife betrayed him not with another man but with another woman, which absolves him completely from all blame for their breaking up – and that the best way for a marriage to succeed is for a couple to set up business together in a semi-rural area. Not two but three married couples go this way in this novel. Meg has a loyal gay male friend though, so obviously there’s nothing wrong with that!

But in spite of all my reservations and criticisms, I have to admit I enjoyed every minute of this book. Do we always have to be so cynical? There is something refreshingly unpretentious about the writing. Sure, it’s too wordy – more needs to be left unsaid, and the dialogue often plods: we don’t need such slavish reportage of every syllable everyone says – but the impulse behind this book is honest, if sentimental. It is well over four hundred pages, but I read it in a matter of hours, even though I knew more or less what would happen.

There is a running metaphor throughout the book, linked to the title, *Call Waiting*. Ally’s final moment of liberation from her repressed city past comes
when she throws her mobile phone out of the car window into a handy ravine in the middle of a call from her pushy ex-boyfriend. The mobile phone, although undoubtedly useful in many contexts, is basically an instrument of the devil and must be dispensed with before true happiness can be attained. People don’t need mobile phones if they work alongside their spouses in a country town.

Throughout the novel, both Ally and Meg have metaphorical calls waiting – their patient men, waiting in the wings until the women have worked out all their mid-life psychological problems of rejection, alienation, boredom and frustration, which are solved in an instant when they finally realise where true value lies – with said men, naturally. Needless to say, the rivals displaced by Chris and Matt are worthless and have no inconvenient feelings for the women to worry about.

*Call Waiting* is sentimental and predictable and sometimes almost unbearably trite, but it still manages to convey an overall impression of charm and wry wit, and I defy the cynics and declare that I don’t regret the hours I spent reading it at all.