

*Ash Rain* is a strong, beautiful novel about troubled and wonderful people who brim with vitality. Hosking has managed that unusual and winning combination, poetic evocative prose with a compelling narrative: settings made vividly present to the reader’s senses, and characters full of pain and unreason who remain lodged in the memory, each with a past and a future beyond the pages of the book.

The story is full of contrasts. One of the most striking is between the vast skies of the Eyre Peninsula in summer and the wet cramped spaces of winter-time Edinburgh, where Dell travels to be with her lover Pat. Many of the conflicting forces that pull on Dell’s life are encompassed in that contrast: wet versus dry, constriction versus freedom, love versus friendship – because in moving to Edinburgh, she leaves her friend and housemate Evvie and her five-year-old daughter Luce. There is contrast, too, between Dell’s ample flesh and Pat’s leanness. There is an echo of the themes of starting afresh and remaking oneself, in the renovations taking place where Dell is living both in Adelaide and Scotland. And always there is the shadow of fire and ash, part of Dell’s real and imagined past.

But to place too much stress on imagery and technique does this novel a disservice. The symbolism is there but it never overwhelms. It serves the narrative, as it should, rather than the reverse, because it is the characters’ symbolism rather than the author’s. It is Dell who feels claustrophobic in the
fuzzy soft light of Edinburgh and longs for the clarity of South Australia. We are not just told she feels it; we feel it with her. Enigmas remain, however. Evvie and Dell may or may not have a sexual relationship, for example. Even the nature of her affair with Pat, though clear enough in many ways, is somewhat elusive. And we never find out everything that happened in Dell’s childhood. The Black Monday bushfire in the Adelaide Hills in 1978, when she was six, was a defining event. ‘It’s not all about the fire. But … that story is the easiest one to tell,’ and the book ends before much more is revealed.

Dell is a difficult person and while she is a thoroughly sympathetic character, we have deep sympathy also for those who love her – Evvie, Pat, Luce and her parents. Although at the end of the novel a kind of equilibrium has been reached, it is certainly precarious, and the seeds of more turmoil are in the wind. They are all still painfully young, with the short perspectives of youth, when a year seems a lifetime. A major milestone is reached at the end, but, as Dell reflects, ‘She is not the first person to make a journey. There will be many more trips to take. This is but one.’