We tend to think of the Gold Coast as a haven for the idle rich, but in *The True Green of Hope* it is a place where people live, work, and struggle with their demons just like the rest of us. The only difference is that the weather is kinder to the homeless — and there’s always the beach.

In a featureless tower block overlooking the Pacific live Samantha Montgomery, a hospital ward attendant, and her lover, hairdresser Emily Cooke. They have been together for seven years, but Sam, at twenty-six, is tormented by the memory of the day, thirteen years before, when she was surfing at a deserted beach and her mother drove away and never came back. Sam struggles not only with the uncertainty of what happened to her mother, but also with the inaccessibility of her memories of that momentous day.

To make sense of her life, Samantha sometimes makes up stories about herself, and ‘these days she’s not sure which of the stories she tells are ones she remembers and which are the ones she’s been telling so long she’s forgotten they aren’t true.’ Her urge to know the truth is driving a wedge between her and Emily, and it’s no help when a stroke victim who is admitted to Sam’s hospital is discovered to have the same name as her long-lost mother, Frances Montgomery. The woman is bruised and disfigured after the stroke, and Sam can’t recognise her, but she spends hours by her bedside, reading to her from *Alice in Wonderland*, just in case she is the mother who read to her when she was a child.
‘The True Green of Hope’ is a quotation from Jules Verne, referring to an atmospheric phenomenon which can occur just as the sun comes up if all the conditions are right. His story ‘Le Rayon Vert’ features characters who believe that if they see this green ray ‘their hearts will never be fooled again.’ Sam is always on the lookout for the ray, and it is an apt image for her restless quest for enlightenment. Emily is more pragmatic. She can’t see that it matters if memory is unreliable, but because Sam won’t be happy until she knows her past, she takes on Sam’s past like a detective, while Sam sits beside the comatose Frances reading, and waits to catch a glimpse of the true green.

This engaging but pensive novel is preoccupied with relationships between lesbian lovers, sisters, mothers and daughters, and a five-year-old niece whose cuteness sometimes cloys. Men are marginal, either irrelevant or a bad memory from younger days on the streets. Nevertheless, Bourke’s characterisations are sensitive and exact. Although the mystery of Frances is never quite solved, and some of the pieces of the jigsaw obstinately won’t fit, Sam eventually accepts, with Emily’s help, that ‘the truth, after all, is so ordinary and incomplete.’