The Submerged Cathedral is Sydney writer Charlotte Wood’s second novel. Written with delicacy and love, it is, she says in the dedication, inspired by her parents’ love story. As I read The Submerged Cathedral this fact kept me from giving up in despair. This couple is buffeted by the world, without the normal protective layers of ego. It’s touch and go, but after twenty years of agonising and penitential self-denial, on the very last page of the book, there is the exquisite relief of a happy ending.

Martin and Jocelyn meet in 1963. He is a doctor, she is a freelance copy editor working on a multi-volume encyclopedia of Australia. Jocelyn refuses Martin’s offer of marriage – “marriage is ordinary”, she says – but agrees to live with him in his house on an island in Pittwater, north of Sydney. She braves the social stigma of what was then seriously regarded as living in sin, not because she is immoral but because she will not taint her love for Martin with the ordinariness of the kind of marriage she has witnessed – her father’s routine unfaithfulness, her mother’s calm acceptance of it.

Jocelyn and Martin are presented with a testing situation. The world intrudes on their idyll in the person of Jocelyn’s older sister Ellen, who appears, fleeing from a violent husband, pregnant, and demanding Jocelyn’s help back at their family home in the mountains. Jocelyn, haunted by the domineering Ellen’s few memorable acts of kindness in their childhood, has no way of saying no. This sets off a train of events for which Martin and Jocelyn take far more of
the share of blame. The logic is untenable: their feelings of guilt rest in being
absent when Ellen’s baby is born prematurely – the baby dies – Martin, a better
doctor than his colleague, could have saved it. Where most people would
accommodate such a tragedy, giving themselves the benefit of the doubt, finding
a way of living with an imperfect situation and putting unhappy memories
behind them, these two romantically and almost self-destructively devote
themselves to their guilt, separately pursuing their masochistic paths for decades
until their final reunion, willed by both but actively pursued by neither.

The settings in this novel are woven into the fabric of the narrative.
Much is unspoken, and the prose is precise, evocative and economical. It is a
book which quivers with pent-up emotion and sensitivity, like its main
characters. The work they do – Martin’s medicine, Jocelyn’s proof-reading – are
extensions of their characters, not just occupations. Despite the title of the novel,
which is taken from the title of a Debussy piano prelude, it is not music but
gardening that provides the novel’s central imagery. Jocelyn, brutally rejected
by her sister after the baby’s death, becomes a landscape gardener. Martin’s
self-imposed penance is joining a trappist monastery, admitting nothing of his
medical expertise, working mutely in the kitchen garden. The exasperation the
reader cannot help but feel for these two conscience-ridden souls is softened,
thanks to Wood’s skilful handling of their story, by sympathy and even
admiration.