

MADAME BOVARY'S
HABERDASHERY
by Maurilia Meehan

Transit Lounge
\$29.95 pb, 272 pp, 978921924415

With her fifth novel, Maurilia Meehan has carved out a subversive niche of chick-lit mystery. Touted as the first of a trilogy, *Madame Bovary's Haberdashery* is an amusing romp for the thinking woman, with references to Flaubert, Milan Kundera, and Agatha Christie. The decidedly feminist viewpoint is tempered by a mordant use of irony and satire.

This is something of a writer's novel, not only for its literary allusions, but also for the number of jokes aimed at arts grants, film rights, and publishers (including book contracts that lock authors into weight-loss programs). However, the story's twists and turns owe much to popular fiction, vampire romance, and other contemporary fantasies.

In a novel peopled with odious male characters, Zac – a Flaubert scholar who is working on the definitive translation of *Madame Bovary* – shows promise as a hero. But the cosy ménage à trois with the quicksilver Odette and her corpulent friend Cicely is soon disrupted when Zac reveals a penchant for Gothic avatars. When her friends vanish, Cicely is left to don her Miss Marple bonnet and sleuth their disappearance in a romp through Internet dating, depraved cults, plagiarising film producers, and opportunistic eye surgeons. The narrative veers off giddily into Cicely's past and offers glimpses of her own novel, an erotic tale inspired by *Madame Bovary*.

Meehan is adept at using the art of surprise to keep the narrative from stalling, but there is a price to pay. There are several non sequiturs: a theme of long-sightedness which is never resolved, and a superfluous character or two, such as Uncle Bill, who tries to train Cicely to be a Very Good Woman. The author has fun, but deprives the reader of empathy with the characters and a consistent and satisfying narrative. The promise of a sequel is not enough.

Carol Middleton

'Rarer than rubies'

Margaret Robson Kett

A pile of picture books to savour – what better start to the year? Experienced authors and artists are met again, and new favourites are found, in these eight books.

Margaret Wild and Freya Blackwood, wonderful book makers in their own right, make a special team in *The Treasure Box* (Viking, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9780670073658). A boy and his father are forced to flee their home as the enemy advances, bombing the town's library on their way. They take one surviving book with them as a treasure 'rarer than rubies, more splendid than silver, greater than gold'.

This writer is at her best when she is sparing with her text and allows the illustrations to complete the story. Wild's text has just the right intonation and rhythm for its theme – people do terrible things to each other, humanity survives. Blackwood's faces and figures are ideal; wan hopefulness characterises most of them. Her manipulation of paper, used in collage and cut-out, improves with each book, and here she creates a landscape that matches the story – 'fragile as butterflies', indeed – and that evokes every land ever laid waste by war. The healing of the country and culture is symbolised by the restoration of the long overdue book 'about our people, about us'. This will be irresistible to story lovers of all ages.

Mem Fox has produced some excellent bedtime books, of which the sublime *Time for Bed* (1993) is an outstanding example. Her latest, *Tell Me about Your Day Today* (Scholastic, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9781742835785), has a nameless boy conversing with Blue Horse, Greedy Goose, and Fat Rabbit about their adventurous days and how 'the whole wild thing turned out okay'. Lauren Stringer's illustrations are dominated by a lovely twilight blue that brings together the separate narratives. As with other books by Fox, there is plenty of room for the adult reader to

talk with the child listener about 'the who, the what and the why'.

The versatile Jackie French's *Dinosaurs Love Cheese* (Angus & Robertson, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9780732292645) features a parade of marauding animals who have cleaned a house out of food behind an oblivious mother's back. A delighted preschooler enjoys the spectacle of tigers eating pizzas and gorillas swinging through the fruit and vegetable section of the supermarket. In most spreads, Rycroft's paintings seem cramped; this leaves little scope for her animal shenanigans and pop culture references. (A gorilla clutching a lettuce is being circled by tiny planes.) Despite the framing narrative of a shopping trip, the action seems disjointed, and this is exacerbated by uneven rhyme.

Attention, aspiring PhD candidates. Does the 'og' ending provide the most slapstick opportunities in rhyming children's literature? It is in rollicking good form in *Dog on Log* (Scholastic, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9781862919648). A dog and a frog prepare for a party, with next to no help from a hog. A rat tries to steal a birthday cake from the feline guest of honour, and things soon deteriorate. Illustrator Kat Chadwick has clearly enjoyed playing with all the hilarious possibilities of Tania Ingram's text. Chadwick's summery pen and ink drawings (reminiscent of Colin West's work) are charming without being cute, and illustrate much that is only alluded to in the short rhyming sentences.

As demonstrated in her previous books, Lisa Shanahan knows small children, their routines, loves, and fears. Her latest book, illustrated by Sara Acton, is *Daisy and the Puppy* (Scholastic, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9781742830513). Daisy's family has had one baby after another, affording them little time to find a puppy. Daisy, a dog-lover, has resorted to washing the neighbourhood dogs in an old baby bath and baying at sirens from the laundry basket while wearing a fake tail. One day Ollie, a dog with 'goopy pie eyes and a firework tail', appears in Mrs Arkwright's Pet Shop window and Mum succumbs to the inevitable. Not all the family are in love with Ollie, however, which threatens his place in the family, and Daisy's happi-



Detail of an illustration from *The Treasure Box*

ness. The story's structure is not helped by a wobbly timeline, and the layout of some pages does not always support the quality of the illustrations. Acton's talent – her action figures are especially good – is wasted on some pages of no consequence. The scene where Daisy achieves her heart's desire does not include the reader in the celebration, and barely includes Ollie.

Remembering Lionsville (Allen & Unwin, \$29.99 hb, 32 pp, 9781742373201) is composed of the accomplished Indigenous artist Bronwyn Bancroft's family history. In a biographical note at the end, she exhorts the reader to 'listen to your old people, write stuff down, do drawings and, most of all, take pride in your family's struggles and victories'. As in many oral histories the narration ranges widely, with the reader invited into each scene. The inclusion of photographs seems appropriate, but they are poorly reproduced and oddly placed, possibly in a deliberate attempt to emphasise the fragmentary nature of the record keeping. The collage with Bancroft's distinctive artwork jars rather than forming part of a bigger picture. A deeply personal book can make the reader feel like an intruder. Despite her wide appeal, *Remembering Lionsville* might have a limited audience.

Cori Brooke and Sue deGennaro have collaborated on a story of the ultimate friendship, *Max and George* (Viking, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9780670076352). The phase of a child's life during which they have an imaginary friend seldom lasts long, but its emotional intensity resonates and is de-

icted well here. Max and George dress alike, think alike, and '[share] the same feelings'. As long as Max had a window to look into, he always had George. But then his new teacher makes him sit away from the window. How will Max manage without George when he gets the jitters? DeGennaro makes inspired use of graph paper and fragments of worksheets in her compositions, and her use of school uniform blue conveys Max's enclosed world. Brooke tells the story entirely in Max's voice, while showing his parents' tolerance, and this helps to make the ending a triumph.

'Bea is a bird of unusual tastes', according to her creator Christine Sharp (University of Queensland Press, \$24.99 hb, 32 pp, 9780702249617). Among her pen and ink companions, Bea stands out of the flock. While they do bird things like build nests, chirp and eat ants, she dances and flies with bats, dreaming of 'travelling the world in a hot air balloon'. Bea has an elongated fish shape, more scaly and streamlined than feathered: Sharp has imagined her as a child might draw her, always looking for new adventures. The scene where Bea is baking is a jarring example of the misuse of collage in the book: scanned fabric, which is the wrong scale, and photoshopped knitted tea cosies and cupcakes spoil the composition. The landscapes through which Bea travels later in the book weigh her down. Overall, there is no tension – this perky bird is her own happy ending. ■

Margaret Robson Kett is a Melbourne reviewer.

THE DUNBAR CASE

by Peter Corris

Allen & Unwin

\$27.99 pb, 247 pp, 9781743310229

Known in certain quarters as 'the godfather of Australian crime fiction', Peter Corris is certainly persistent. Prior to this, he has written thirty-seven novels involving the wily, irrepressible Cliff Hardy. *The Dunbar Case* showcases an older but still sprightly Hardy, who deals with maritime mysteries, amorous women, and a notorious crime family.

Henry Wakefield, a stuffy professor with a passing interest in maritime history, contacts Hardy to perform a seemingly innocuous task. He is to meet with prisoner John Twizell, who is possibly linked by blood to the last survivor of the wreck of the HMS *Dunbar*. Professor Wakefield, in return, promises to pay Hardy handsomely for his time.

Naturally, unforeseen difficulties are provided by the rough, gruff, and difficult-to-love Tanner family. As Cliff investigates, he is first threatened and then coerced into helping the Tanners locate a stash of missing money, all the while diving deeper into an increasingly hostile milieu of thugs, cops, and delectable dames.

Corris is clearly at home within the boundaries of crime fiction. *The Dunbar Case* is easy to read, well plotted, and suggests that, at the age of seventy, Corris can still hold his own in an increasingly crowded genre. The more astute reader is at times left begging for greater detail beyond the perfunctory: sex scenes rarely exceed a single sentence, his female characters seem unnaturally one-dimensional, and, in setting a scene, much gets told that could more effectively have been shown.

The Dunbar Case is an entertaining, if not particularly memorable, entry in the life and times of Cliff Hardy. Fans of Corris may well find more to like, and why not? At thirty-eight novels and counting, he has earned the right to a little give and take.

Laurie Steed