

Long Paddock

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reviews Fiona McGregor *Indelible Ink* (Scribe 2010 464 pp)

Fiona McGregor's *Indelible Ink* presents itself as the perfect book-club book – a portrait of contemporary urban and suburban Sydney, with the edgy subplot of a North Shore grandmother getting tattoos. I hope this novel does the book club circles. Particularly the Sydney ones. Because the conservatism, selfishness and materialism that has become synonymous with urban (and much of suburban) Sydney and the city's obsession with real estate is both the subject of the narrative and object of ferocious critique in this novel. A vitriolic image of the rotten, empty heart of middle class suburbia in the tradition of Patrick White and Christos Tsiolkas, *Indelible Ink* marks out a path away from a twenty-first century Australia that is materially wealthy but spiritually bankrupt.

An attempt to come to terms with the social legacies of the Howard era and of late capitalism, McGregor's most recent novel has drawn repeated comparisons with Tsiolkas' *The Slap* for very good reason. Both realist novels located in suburban Sydney and Melbourne respectively, *Indelible Ink* and *The Slap* foreground the avariciousness and individualism endemic to contemporary Australian urban and suburban culture. As Marie's son, Leon says of Sydney, "God, he loathed this city, the pretension, the disregard, the wealth – the selfishness of the wealth" (317). Like *The Slap*, *Indelible Ink* is an exceptional novel by one of Australia's most exciting writers.

Indelible Ink follows Mosman grandmother Marie King's journey away from the conventions of her North Shore life. This rejection is indicated viscerally early on in the novel as "Marie vomited her lunch of Pinot Grigio and scampi linguini across the floor [of the furniture shop]" (15). Through her friendship with tattoo artist Rhys, and an accumulation of increasingly visible tattoos that are also

increasingly ornate and symbolic, Marie begins to question the structures and premises of her life, as “an awareness of difference had come to her” (200). McGregor gives us a sense of Marie’s transformation without fetishising subcultures, or instituting an alternate orthodoxy – the tattoo community, for example, are shown to be just as invested in real estate as every other character in the novel. The depth and complexity of McGregor’s characters, particularly protagonist Marie King, positions the novel amongst the best of contemporary Australian realist novels.

McGregor’s novel is an acute observation of some of the maladies, as well as the humanity of contemporary urban Australian culture. As tattoo artist Rhys puts it, “We’re one of the richest nations on earth and still all pretending to be Aussie battlers[...]And still trying to plant the flag with the real-estate business” (197). McGregor is not heavy handed with these insights, they are given to us gently through the subtle transformations of the compelling and richly-wrought protagonist Marie.

Indelible Ink shows how it is easier for us to, as Marie’s son Leon reflects, “keep the idea of privilege foreign”, for as Leon puts it “to admit it would be to admit that he in turn owed concessions” (360). Through the Marie’s courage and openness to new ways of living and thinking, this timely, accurate and often moving portrait of contemporary Australian life encourages us to imagine other, more generous ways and possibilities of relating to others, ourselves and the world.