

Spectrum - Books
PICK OF THE WEEK
Reviews by Bruce Elder
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SO THIS IS LIFE

By Anne Manne

Melbourne University Press, 152pp, \$34.99

There are two kinds of memoirs: the Hugh Lunn jocular "let me tell you some funny stories about billycarts and Jaffas" and the quiet and poetic "let me reflect on the nature of memory and childhood". Anne Manne's memoir of growing up in western Victoria belongs in the latter category. She takes small personal memories and, with beautifully crafted prose and deep reflection, sees them in a larger, universal context. Thus, the story of a childhood failure to feed the family's horse properly leads to the conclusion: "What I understood, was that even in very imperfect beings — and all of us are that — there can be, nonetheless, moments of transcendence."

With the eye of a poet, she sees Australian rural life with evocative precision: "It was summer. A great drift of heat simply stopped and sank, immovable, over the town. The light splintered hard and hot in a dry inland heat, not a breath of wind to ease it."

This is more a collection of carefully observed vignettes than a coherent narrative. Manne looks at the complexity of families and marvels at her grandmother, who admired Robert Menzies not for his politics but because he spoke with a faux-English accent and stood tall. She tells the story of her three maiden aunts with their precise manners and antiquarian airs; describes her childhood conflict with a teacher, Old Emu as she calls him, who was vindictive and malevolent; recounts a rare moment of passion and excitement involving a "Continental" named Roman and his exotic girlfriend; tells the painfully sad story of her English teacher who had to deal with a husband who had gone mad and a profoundly disabled son; and, in a remarkable encapsulation of what she calls "ordinary tragedy", she tells the story of a family devastated by the death of a young boy.

This small book reaches into the heart of the Australian rural experience and sees it with subtlety and touching intelligence. It is a rarity — a book that is true, honest and resonates with the complexities of growing up and living in a small country town.