

# Books

## Rosemarie's babies

by Katherine England

ADELAIDE-BORN journalist, reviewer and Radio National producer Kate Veitch has been on the fringes of literary activity for so long that it seems amazing that she has only just produced her first novel.

Not that *Listen* (Penguin, \$32.95) has any of the hallmarks of the novice: it's a most assured debut, a page-turning, up-beat family story written with clarity and grace.

It begins on Christmas Eve in 1967 with a picture of a sour, sulky, young Englishwoman trapped in an Australian marriage that once seemed exotic and dangerous but which has become unbearably small and stifling.

Rosemarie is pinched by the demands of four young children, reproached by the irrepressible, boring bonhomie of the middle-aged husband who refers to her proudly as "my little wifey", and taunted by the distant spectacle of the drab, postwar London she so happily abandoned as it transforms itself into the fashion centre of the Swinging Sixties.

Stuffing chooks in a heatwave, listening to her tense, anxious children squabble over their attempts to please her, Rosemarie snaps, and the book jumps forward to the present.

The children are successful adults with children of their own, but their anxieties, unallayed by success, have hardened into virtual psychoses.

Deborah, the ever-competent eldest, is a bossy, driven workaholic with a demanding political career; golden-boy James is a self-deprecating artist with a loving but oddly unfulfilled marriage; Robert, a besotted husband and father and a respected primary



Debut... Adelaide-born Kate Veitch.

school principal, is haunted by obsessive-compulsive tendencies and Meredith, the youngest, has a problem with alcohol and with finding a direction for her life.

A looming crisis brings the siblings together when it becomes clear that their father Alex, now in his active mid-70s, is descending into the shadows of dementia.

But while each is still reacting to that development, creatively according to character and all its childhood-inflicted flaws, a new and utterly unexpected, utterly believable chain of events brings that childhood palpably back into their lives and forces them individually to confront their mother's long-ago action and all that has stemmed from it.

The great strength of Veitch's novel is her characters – a large cast of most engaging,

convincingly rounded, human mixtures of the good and the bad, tending valiantly and with some effort towards the good.

The grandchildren are particularly beguiling: tall, laid-back Laurence, acting the parent to his mother Meredith's dependant and often drunken child, and bright, steadfast Olivia determinedly maintaining her individuality from an early age against her dominating mother Deborah (sensibly eavesdropping Olivia "who firmly believed that being good was no match for being well-informed..." and occasionally heart-catching, Olivia who, towards the end of the book knows "the incredible, heady feeling of being someone who had *two* friends...").

As the characters acknowledge and adjust to the changes in their lives, satisfying small mysteries are uncovered and gradually solved; healing takes place, personalities realistically change and aptitudes, long ago blocked, are unblocked and blossom.

For some there is new sexual fulfilment, sensuously, erotically described; for others the changes they can make to their more abrasive selves come too late to save what they have ridden roughshod over for so long – Veitch is a generous but wisely not an indulgent god to her little world.

In every case, however, much that is positive is salvaged, both from the past and from the upheavals of the present. Here, indeed, are demonstrated for the reader the realities of the "family values" to which John Howard pays such constant and such specious lip-service: gentle, generous, sustaining, hard-won and infinitely worth working for.

The reader recognises the genuine article and finds it hard to put the novel down.