

Perth writer Alice Nelson's *The Last Sky*, which was shortlisted for the Vogel Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2006, is a quite stunning achievement for a first novel. The publisher's blurb by Fremantle Press describes it as "a painful tale of lost love in wartime Shanghai," although this is by no means a conventional tale of romance. Heartfelt, poignant, and filled with a sense of exile and loss, it explores and laments the failure of love for two women of different times and different cultures. Set in Hong Kong in the period leading up to its handover to China in 1997, the novel takes the reader inside the failing marriage of the narrator, Australian academic Maya Wise, and her archaeologist husband. Adrift in a strange city, Maya meets an elderly Chinese man, Ken Tiger. Hearing his tale of a love affair sixty years earlier with the beautiful and enigmatic Jewish-Russian refugee Ada Lang, Maya sets out to piece together the story of Ada's life and that of her brief and doomed marriage to a Shanghai tycoon. I was particularly impressed by the quality and assurance of Nelson's sensuous yet spare, almost lapidary, prose, which seems capable of evoking vividly for the reader whatever it chooses: the Hong Kong waterfront, the Chinese desert, a Rembrandt painting. This author is clearly a major new talent and one to watch for in the future.

*Fear of Tennis* by David Cohen, a Perth-born writer, mainly of short stories, now living in Melbourne, was another standout Australian first novel of 2007–08. It is not often one comes across a comic debut novel – certainly not such an accomplished one. "It wouldn't be a bad thing if *Fear of Tennis* became a cult-book: like *Seinfeld*, it makes Fabergé mountains out of everyday molehills," the reviewer Owen Richardson wrote of it in the *Melbourne Age*. While not quite, like *Seinfeld*, "about nothing," Cohen's novel is indeed quirky and offbeat with a dry wit and an acute eye for some of the absurdities of contemporary urban life. Its hero, Mike Planner, is a nerdy, obsessive-compulsive type who works as a courtroom sound-recorder in present-day Perth. He is also a man who has a fixation with hygiene and bathrooms, public and private: "The sight of a well-designed, well-maintained public toilet always fills me with pleasure." But Mike's closeted existence is changed in unexpected ways after he happens to see his best mate from school, now a yuppie banker and tennis addict, on a bus. The plot resolves itself in the age-old comic tradition of a satisfying, "feel-good" ending with all loose ends tied. I thoroughly enjoyed this novel: for its intelligence, its understated humour, its engaging central character, and, not least, its sure grasp of the conventions of the difficult craft of comic writing. Once again, this author is a new writing talent worth watching.

*Other Country* is another first novel, from Perth writer Stephen Scourfield, who is probably best-known in his home city as the current travel editor of the *West Australian* newspaper. *Other Country* is the tale of two brothers, the Ace and Wild Billy, set against the backdrop of West Australia's far-north Kimberley region. The brothers walk out their burnt-out father to make their own way in the world as cattlemen. Given the chance to run a station of their own, each responds differently to the challenges this brings, with ultimately tragic consequences. This is a novel marked by a strong sense of place. Almost every page seems to radiate the author's passion for, and knowledge of, the Kimberley, its seasons, landscapes, people and lifestyle. What is otherwise an excellent and original novel is, however, rather let down by its closing 50 pages, in which it seems to suddenly quicken pace as it moves towards what I felt was a rather cinematic, almost melodramatic ending. This would have been a better novel, I think, with a less conventional ending, although its author writes passages of sparkling, descriptive prose.

*Lilia's Secret*, which the publishers Vintage describe as "a seductive story of chasing love and ghosts in Mexico," is a first novel by the Melbourne-based Erina Reddan, and it is much closer, at least in intent, to the "popular" novel than the others reviewed here. Reddan is a Walkley Award-winning journalist and a former ABC foreign correspondent who met her Mexican future husband, Victor Del Rio, while on assignment in French Polynesia, and it is his exotic family history that is said to have inspired the writing of the novel. The title character, Lilian de Las Flores, is apparently based partly on Reddan's husband's grandmother, a Mexican revolutionary of the early 1900s, who went on to allegedly murder at least five of her six husbands and to grow rich through peddling drugs and running brothels. Yet, paradoxically, she was also a midwife and a folk-healer. Its plot centres on a quest to determine whether the fictional Lilia was "a heroine or a monster." It must be said that *Lilia's Secret* is an undemanding read. The narrative is located solely in the present, although it seems to call out for being set at least partly in the past, and the story of Lilia is told, or rather explicated, mainly through passages of rather inexpert dialogue. As a result, no real sense of "Mexico" itself, its culture, or its past, emerges from the page, except maybe that of the first-time foreign visitor. Another issue here, at least for me, was that any English-language novel about Mexico and its "ghosts" must inevitably bear comparison with Malcolm Lowry's 1947 classic *Under the Volcano*, which this one simply cannot.

Finally, two interesting first novels each take darker themes from within the country's criminal subculture. Andrew Hutchinson's debut novel