



Illustration: Simon Letch

Emotions uncovered, layer by subtle layer

In the hands of a skilled storyteller, showy flourishes are out of fashion.

Review by Caroline Baum

Oscar Wilde and Napoleon had famously fatal reactions to wallpaper: the former lamenting the paper peint on his Parisian walls from his deathbed, the latter unsuspectingly poisoned by it. Others have been less extreme in their dislike. Now, according to home-decorating glossies, wallpaper is enjoying a revival. Reinvented in groovy digital images, it has recovered from its fusty old lady image to grace the feature walls of smart inner-city apartments, boutique hotels and chic restaurants. Thanks to the rediscovery of Florence Broadhurst's graphic designs, bold pattern is back.

But not texture. The furry feel of flock has yet to enjoy rehabilitation. In an era when surface is all, we prefer our planes smooth. Flock has connotations of fluffiness, of Victorian decor, of walls swirling with overwhelming, suffocating busyness and of suburban aspiration to bourgeois taste. It's very Dame Edna. So it takes a daring and original



Fiction

FLOCK

Lyn Hughes

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\$32.99

mind to think of something as dated as textured wallpaper as the starting point for a novel, though the word flock has other meanings that marry happily with this subject.

Moving backwards and forwards

in time, the novel begins with a chance encounter in 1950 between the aptly named Francis Sprigge, a quiet designer of wallpapers inspired by Australian flora and fauna, and the troubled Lillian Powys. Thirty years later, their daughter, Addie, finds memories of her parents' unravelling marriage intruding on her professional work as a heritage conservator peeling back layers of history.

Hughes is skilful in developing themes of family without overworking her metaphor. Yes, she does refer to cracks appearing and being papered over in relationships as Addie and a team of experts embark on restoring a historic house in the Blue Mountains. But the imagery is not laboured; it steals into the narrative as a quiet resonance. As in a well-decorated room, you hardly notice the furnishings, only that you feel comfortable in it. In the same way, you recognise here that you are in safe and capable hands. As with a skilled tradesman, Hughes knows how much glue and pressure to apply to make her story stick. Her characters paper their

identities with a collage of emotions, fears, doubts, regrets and desires. As these are peeled away, more is revealed underneath until the very essence of character is exposed.

Relationships take shape slowly and Hughes's rhythm is unhurried, measured and careful as Addie's fascination for her French colleague, Sylvie, develops. Similarly, there is a tentative quality to her approach to her less realised colleagues, Will and Richard, when it comes to loss, guilt and ambition. All of them are reserved by nature and rarely say what they are actually thinking. Hughes orchestrates the interplay of storylines with delicacy and subtlety, like a piece of chamber music in a minor key that resolves without a showy finale. Atmospheric, internal and private, the novel's stately pace matches that of the painstaking restoration work that Abbie and her team engage in. When Abbie comes across a previously overlooked stain, Hughes cleverly uses their interpretations of its possible cause—wine? blood?—to elaborate on their own secrets.

Flock's unwavering lack of acceleration and understated tone may frustrate readers looking for excitement but will reward those who are patient and don't require their fiction to be punctuated with showy dramatic climaxes.

Wallpaper may be enjoying a renaissance but there is nothing hip about this elegant novel. It does not pander to fashion or attempt to seduce the reader with attitude. Deliberately constructed and underpinned with scholarly and historical references that suggest in-depth research (confirmed by an extensive bibliography), it may be an artificial and self-conscious way to explore more traditional human patterns, but Hughes pulls it off despite occasional stilted dialogue. It's impossible to spot the joins on the most professionally applied wallpaper. Hughes's decision to shift around in time makes the literary equivalent of such seamlessness impossible. Perhaps it is that lack of perfection and illusion that makes its motif so human.