



Straight to the emotional point

FICTION

The China Garden

By Kristina Olsson
UQP, 279pp, \$32.95

Reviewed by Dorothy Johnston

THE China Garden is noteworthy on several counts, not least of which is the almost complete absence of fathers. The one father in residence might have done better by his daughter, Abby, if he'd disappeared as well. There's a marvellous short scene towards the end where Kieran, who has been watching over Abby, clouts her father with a snow dome. But the comic potential of this moment becomes absorbed in the drama of searching for Abby, the fear of what has become of her and even fear for her life. A list of characters with absent fathers includes Kieran, Laura, Laura's daughter, Kate, and the abandoned baby who begins the story.

The China Garden is noteworthy also for its absence of flabbiness and wasted words. Every image, every scene, is sure of its place; and though the point of view changes fairly often, an economy and concentration of focus is helped by the fact that the action takes place within two weeks of a hot summer, the weeks after Laura receives news of her mother's death.

Angela has been living as an artist in a small NSW coastal town and Laura, estranged from her, has been based in Europe for several decades. During the fortnight, the main characters move around the town: Laura trying to make sense of disturbing information revealed in Angela's will; Kieran, who has been Angela's friend, watching her and Abby; and watched in turn by his grandmother as she follows her customary routes and habits.

In conveying the rhythms and the details of these movements, Olsson shows great skill and delicacy, and in dialogue sequences her ability to go straight to the emotional point without striking false notes. The theme of adoption is treated with uncompromising scorn, though it's left to a minor character, a solicitor named Fergus, to call it an industry

"based on shame, on bad girls who had illegitimate babies". Kieran, who can see into Angela's heart, thinks, "everything - her painting, her sadness - was not about something that was there but about something that was missing."

One trend in fiction is excessive concentration on the present tense, thrusting readers into the heart of every episode as though they must be persuaded, at all costs, that it's happening right then. While undoubtedly effective at times, exclusive use of the present can lead, in my view, to a sameness, a predictability.

Olsson avoids fashionable traps and the confusion they produce concerning memory and its place in time. Confusion may exist in the minds of her characters but never in her narrative construction. She makes use of alternating points of view to good effect, partly because her characters, particularly Kieran, remain absolutely and distinctly

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themselves. It's no mean feat to portray, with imagination and intelligence, a young man who would in ordinary language be labelled "simple" or "mentally disabled". Kieran is the story's conscience, the town's eyes and ears. He misses little, yet is not, as he would like to believe, capable of making himself invisible.

Memorable images - such as the broken china cup Laura finds buried in her mother's garden - dovetail with her work in Italy grafting ancient fruit trees. A wedding dress enhances a scene of great poignancy and urgency when Abby is found at last.

It's not uncommon to come across a story that moves rapidly, with dialogue that turns corners on three wheels or, alternatively, a story where the images and the music of the language cause you to catch your breath. It is uncommon to find both together.