

Jarad Henry  
BLOOD SUNSET

Arena, \$29.95 pb, 327pp, 9781741754209

**D**etective Rubens McCauley has recovered almost fully from a gunshot wound suffered while exposing corrupt Melbourne cops: see *Head Shot* (2005). Colleague Cassie Withers supports McCauley, but his superior officer wishes him elsewhere. His private life teeters on the brink: he has neglected his mother who suffered a stroke; he has unresolved issues with his father; his brother wants him to counsel his niece about the dangers of party drugs; and he hopes to revive his relationship with his estranged wife.

Smoke from bushfires across country Victoria turn the twilight bay at St Kilda blood-red, and the uniformed cops pray for rain to ease the summer season of domestics. McCauley is called to the back of a café, where the corpse of Dallas Boyd lies. Seeing the syringe in Boyd's arm, McCauley signs the report 'nil suspicious circumstances', but he orders a forensic pathology report and the death becomes very suspicious indeed.

McCauley's investigation of Boyd's death among the St Kilda squats is absorbing. While battling bureaucratic sclerosis, McCauley discovers an abusive stepfather, a girlfriend who is a prostitute, one mate who is dead and another who has burgled a house. McCauley suspects that Boyd was blackmailing some dangerous criminals involved in child pornography.

Jarad Henry has created a convincing character in Rubens McCauley. The office politics and the dialogue among the cops are realistically cynical. McCauley is a complex, flawed human being and, as a narrator, is vulnerable to doubts, passions and thoughts which invite empathy rather than admiration. While McCauley might complain about an underside of St Kilda invisible to tourists, Henry's evocation of the music, multiculturalism, waterfront and alternative atmosphere retains the suburb's appeal. Readers will hope that McCauley reverses his decision to leave St Kilda and returns to act as catalyst in another Henry mystery.

**Tony Smith**

Angus Gaunt  
PRIME CUTS: STORIES

Mockingbird, \$18 pb, 72 pp, 9781740274593

**'T**hese stories were all written on the 7.22 between Normanhurst and Central,' reports the author. I find it eminently pleasing to learn that a writer is so driven to create that he will suffer through even the lurching ignominies of train travel to get words on the page. It speaks of a higher purpose, one that most commuters, hard-wired to their iPods or up to their eyeballs in Sudoku, will never recognise. So, hats off Mr Gaunt, for bucking the trend. His stories – there are three in this collection – all bear the mark of a writer with an instinct for narrative; they are the right shape. Unlike the trains they were written in, however, they tend to follow a haphazard trajectory, even if a sense of inevitability pervades. Between set-up and dénouement, the dramatic tension is confidently built as his protagonists bob and drift on the tides of their lives.

Gaunt's treatment of dialogue is particularly accomplished. He has a great ear for the pitch of a conversation, and is consistently able to transpose the nuances and tics of natural speech into written form. In a genre which demands brevity, his use of conversation, particularly in the first two stories, is not simply decorative but revelatory, subtly confessional.

Unfortunately, the strength of Gaunt's storytelling is not always matched by his prose. There are, throughout, awkward formulations and mixed metaphors which imperil the effect for the reader. The ocean, for example, undulates 'like a living thing', and one character's armchair and television set are referred to as 'withered fruit of her eighty-one years'. Of course, the upside to these complaints is that they are easily righted, and I am confident that the gap between prose and story evident in this collection will be considerably shortened by the time his next batch is ready.

All in all, *Prime Cuts* represents forty-three minutes out of Gaunt's waking day well spent.

**Dan Toner**

Debra Adelaide  
THE HOUSEHOLD GUIDE TO DYING

Picador, \$32.95 pb, 395 pp, 9780330424257

**W**hy are there so many books about death and dying appearing at the moment? Is it about the baby boomers facing up to their mortality? It is certainly a subject that interests me, and Debra Adelaide's novel should be compelling. Unfortunately, I found its determined flippancy laboured and grating. The first-person narrator, Delia, a writer of household guides, is not yet forty. Given a bad prognosis for her breast cancer, she decides that her last work will be a guide to dying, in which she will record her physical and emotional journey.

A self-confessed 'control freak' confronted with her inevitable loss of control, Delia writes instructions for the ways in which her family should live after her death. She plans her younger daughter's future wedding (Daisy is nine years old), and chooses her husband Joe's next sexual partner. To demystify her burial, Delia commissions her own coffin and has it placed on the front verandah to familiarise the family with it. (We know that John Donne practised lying in his.) Delia then asks her publisher to take photographs of her lying in it sipping a martini. She attends an autopsy, meticulously noting the body parts as they are exposed, and later describes a heart transplant. She fills boxes with mementoes for her girls and loads the freezer with pre-prepared food for 'afterwards'. She surreptitiously plants flowers in the lawn of her misanthropic neighbour. Most importantly, Delia makes a pilgrimage to Amethyst, the northern country town from which she fled as a pregnant teenager twenty years earlier. There, twelve years ago, she experienced the greatest tragedy of her life. Now her mission is to find an unnamed person in order to achieve spiritual peace.

This novel is well written and rich in literary allusion. Clearly, Adelaide is aiming to subvert the taboo surrounding death that we have in Western culture. But my readerly response shifted from incredulity to irritation to distaste. The sausage-making episode is especially offensive.

**Christina Hill**