

School steeped in small-town complexities - Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - July 16, 2016 - page 24

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The Teacher's Secret By Suzanne Leal Allen & Unwin, 432pp, \$32.99.

In a small town such as Brindle, on a peninsula somewhere in NSW (this is "league country"), generations reproduce themselves, but parochialism brings stability at a cost. In the case of Mel Johnson, happily married to Adam, a local builder, "Brindle pulls her back until she is forced to give in to it".

For Sid, in his 60s and long-term general assistant at the local primary school, it is "strange to think of young Melissa Saunders as a wife and mother".

This is the comfortably organised small community whose upheaval Suzanne Leal depicts in her second novel, The Teacher's Secret. Alternating between the points of view and memories of seven characters, Leal begins with Terry Pritchard, whose distant past provides the novel's title. He is married, childless, 57 years old, a former carpenter whose 18 years teaching at the same school have left his enthusiasm undimmed: he "looked forward to the first day of the term the ways the kids look forward to the first day of the holidays".

As the long summer holiday ends, Terry and his female colleagues at Brindle Public are about to be introduced to their acting principal for a year.

The doctrinaire, disruptive outsider is the young education department bureaucrat Laurie Mathews, formerly of the Child Protection Unit (work that persuaded her that all those accused of crimes against children, almost all of them men, were guilty). Her career change, notwithstanding a belief that "there's something messy about a school", is no doubt prompted by ambition, although here and elsewhere Leal's portrayal is underdone.

We have to infer what damage lies behind Laurie's lonely self-righteousness, a reverence for "systems" and a lack of empathy. Soon enough she is given a pretext to act. Against regulations that she promptly quotes to him, Terry has touched a child in the playground. Exploding into an explanation, he tells her: "I gave the child a cuddle. Her mad, drug-addled mother had just lashed out at her in front of the whole school." In his view, rules are trumped by long personal knowledge of the people and families in his care.

By now Leal has set other lines of plot in motion. Each of them is also a social problem in miniature: how Nina's marriage breaks up, together with the financial and family adjustments that painfully follow; how refugees from a distant country (in Africa rather than Asia) are received in such a place as Brindle.

The approach is a touch programmatic, but the stories of Nina, whose husband, the club manager Steve, leaves her for a long-ago girlfriend, and of “Rebecca Vera, actress, model, media personality”, are offered with a convincing thickness of detail. The separation involves Nina in a change of jobs and towns. She ends up taking 6P, Terry’s class before the new principal forced him out. Thus Nina becomes the second upsetting arrival in the lives of children who are keen to tell her so. Rebecca, who has fled with her son Samuel to join her husband, a mining engineer with a fellowship at the local university (details left vague), is also drawn into the school community.

The publisher’s blurb tells us that **Leal** is “a lawyer experienced in child protection, criminal law and refugee law”. The first and third areas inform some of the strongest writing in the novel. When Terry’s wife, Michelle, consolingly reminds him “of all the kids you saw through that place”, and we see his individual support for endangered girls, the distinction is between protection of that kind, and that in which Laurie believes. In one of the novel’s several set pieces, Rebecca goes through a legal meeting to secure the respite of residency. In the deferred climax to her story, she confides, with reluctance, anger and shame, the sexual abuse that led her to flee with her son. By implication, this is the kind of private testimony that ought to alter public responses to refugees — but **Leal** does not preach.

Her long but quick-moving novel allows **Leal** to test her structural skills and the variety of characters she can manage with conviction. There is a delicately introduced and persuasive romance in old age, a hilarious family conference concerning racial abuse, the dishevelled carnival of the end-of-year concert that 6P turns into rap performances of *The Wolf* and *The Bears*, sometimes acrid glimpses of the institutional politics within even so small a concern as *Brindle Public School*.

In *The Teacher’s Secret*, **Leal** intelligently sifts a great many personal and professional observations and political reflection; it’s a novel that — besides a good deal else — confirms a shift in attention among a number of Australian writers away from metropolitan centres to complex provincial lives. Peter Pierce edited *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*.