



Privacy (Genna De Bont, Fourth Estate, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9780732295745, April) ☹ ★ ★ ★

Warren 'Wren' Fox is a 35-year-old who lives with his mother in a one-bedroom house in semi-rural Victoria. He works for his neighbour Richard in his musical instrument repair business, breeds rats in a shed, and does odd jobs for people in the nearby town—simple, repetitive tasks with clear guidelines. Wren has led a sheltered life, and while he's capable of taking care of himself, he's not what most people consider 'normal'. So when he comes across an explicit online journal written by Richard's sister, we start to realise the gaps between his perspective and others'. Wren has always been devoted to Madeline, but he's not the only one interested in her, and she's not the only one being watched. The author of *The Pepper Gate* (UQP) explores obsession, communication

and impairment in a second novel that burns slowly but eventually rewards. Its cover art and subtitle—'A story of obsession and spying'—suggest more titillation than it delivers, but *Privacy* is a quiet story, as befits its narrator, and Genna de Bont takes her time to lay out all the pieces. When the picture eventually becomes clear, it's worth the wait. This midlist literary novel should appeal to readers who favour nuance over action.

Lachlan Jobbins is a reviewer, editor and ex-bookseller. He is one of the presenters of For the Love of Books on STUDIO (Foxtel)



The Railwayman's Wife (Ashley Hay, A&U, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9781743314449, April) ☹ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Set on the south coast of NSW in Thirroul in 1948, where D H Lawrence wrote *Kangaroo*, this stunning novel follows the lives of several seemingly disparate characters. Dr Draper has seen the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. Roy has also been in the war, where he wrote poetry but can no longer find words. Roy's sister Iris lives alone and cleans the house obsessively. Mac is an engine driver and trains are his business. Ani Lachlan, the railwayman's wife, and her 10-year-old daughter Isabel, who is wise beyond her years, are coping with terrible grief. Ani takes a job in the local library where she matches books with people and their dreams. One man dreams of being a poet, another of being a doctor. Many rhythms form the soundtrack to this story—the sounds of the ocean, the

words of great poets and writers, the changing views in a kaleidoscope, and the constant presence of trains. This is a heart-crunching novel about reading and writing, dreaming and hoping, loving and taking flight. It's been a while since I felt so deeply affected by a novel and I will be very surprised if this book is not an award winner.

Paula Grunseit is a freelance journalist, editor and reviewer



The Secret Lives of Men (Georgia Blain, Scribe, \$27.95 pb, ISBN 9781922070357, April) ☹ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Many adjectives have been used to describe Georgia Blain's work, including evocative, powerful, atmospheric, haunting, rich, thought-provoking, skilful, uncompromising and finely detailed—all of which apply to this collection of short stories, Blain's seventh book. To the mix I would add succinct and insightful. Somewhat misleadingly titled (although it is the title of the first of the 13 stories), *The Secret Lives of Men* is a series of vignettes exploring aspects of life in contemporary Australia. That said, the stories are in no way obviously political—rather, their Australianess is situated in the the easily relatable suburban contexts and pared-back prose. I enjoyed joining the characters mid-stream, and that Blain trusts the reader to quickly catch up with the intricacies of the

plot. The stories that resonated most with me include 'Just a Wedding', in which a young bride is having second thoughts about her rushed nuptials; 'Murramarang', which examines failed friendships and finishes with a delicious twist; and 'The Bad Dog Park', where a man's devotion to his unwell pet is severely tested. Blain's clear and distinct voice provides the consistency and integrity for these moving tales—a rare treat.

Rachel Wilson is a Melbourne-based media academic and former bookseller



Steeplechase (Krissy Kneen, Text, \$29.99 tpb, ISBN 9781922079879, April) ☹ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The celebrated artist Emily Reich is worth millions and lauded by the art community. Her younger sister Bec has scraped by with what she perceives to be a fairly ordinary existence as an adequate artist and art teacher, uncomfortably engaged in a relationship with one of her students. A sudden summons to Beijing by the estranged Emily forces Bec to unravel the traumatic events of their isolated childhood. Emily's unpredictable mental state is coupled with the mean streak of an occasionally vicious older sister. Typical sibling disagreements over who took on which role in a childhood game have a dark undercurrent, and as Emily's madness once more threatens her reality, Bec must untangle her memories, her identity and her art before she is consumed by her sister's reality. The repetitive

concerns about his youth push Bec's relationship with her student briefly into tedious territory, but not for long. Krissy Kneen's deceptively simple prose careens toward a startling and horrifying denouement; her talent for strikingly vibrant imagery shines. Recurring motifs of horses and flames come together in a final, disturbing image of Emily, providing Bec with an unexpected catharsis. *Steeplechase* is a departure for Kneen, who is best known for her erotic writing. This novel will appeal to a broader audience, while her fans will continue to relish Kneen's vivid imagery and fearless prose.

Portia Lindsay is a former bookseller who now works at the NSW Writers' Centre