John Clanchy’s latest novel *The Hard Word* concerns itself with the struggles of a contemporary family coping with an elderly relative suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease. To do this he has followed the path made most famous by William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, and recently Graham Swift’s *Last Orders*, and has each chapter told from the perspective of various members of the family.

The presence of Faulkner’s great work looms large over any author attempting to replicate his use of multiple interior monologues, and Clanchy adds to the difficulties involved in such a form by allowing Grandmother Vera, the sufferer of Alzheimer’s, her own voice. Such efforts as well recall another Faulkner work, *The Sound and the Fury*, and the monologue of Benjy Compson. Thus Clanchy must be given points for effort. The pit falls involved in attempting to convey the thoughts of a person suffering a mental illness, however, are great, and Clanchy does not succeed as well as he might wish.

The novel involves the five members of family living in Sydney. Grandmother Vera (called ‘Mother’); her daughter Miriam, whose second husband Philip is a lawyer on the rise prospects; Laura, Miriam’s teenage daughter from her first marriage; and Katie, the six year old daughter of Philip and Miriam, who oddly is the only family member without an interior monologue. With Miriam’s first husband having been Greek, and thus causing Laura to have a different last name to Kate and her parents, Clanchy has created a family unit that is a veritable mixture of the old and modern. The family is extended, but it is a second marriage, and it is a multicultural mix. This later aspect assumes greater importance when we discover Miriam teaches English to migrant women — one of whom is a detainee in a refugee detention centre, and through Miriam we come to hear the stories of hardship these women have endured before arriving in Australia.

It is here however, that Clanchy’s narrative fails, largely as a result of confusion over his purpose. He seems unsure of whether his story is about a family coping with the stress and despair of Vera’s illness, or about multicultural Australia, and immigration policy. This failure is also a direct result of his use of multiple narrators, for there seems little reason behind the decision. Such a form should allow the reader greater understanding of each of the protagonists, yet in his desire to broach a broader subject the personal voice is diminished, and the voices of those not given monologues is all but
rendered irrelevant. As much as Clanchy would like us to feel empathy with the migrant women, their plight is, by virtue of his narrative form, rendered secondary and underdone.

The voices of each member of the family as well has unequal strength. By far the most powerful is that of Laura. Clanchy effectively portrays the mind of a teenage girl who worries about fitting in, is discovering a growing sexuality, all the while struggling with the confines of her family situation. Indeed so effectively does he use Laura to relate the events of the household, that it is tempting to wonder what could have been achieved had Clanchy used her as the only narrator, as her role is ultimately undone because of the narrative. For unlike As I Lay Dying, or Last Orders, which centre around the passing of a family member or friend, The Hard Word is essentially about the waiting of a person to die. Thus Clanchy attempts to have the protagonists carry out their lives, all the while knowing that grandmother Vera’s Alzheimer’s is worsening. Thus while Laura’s struggles with growing up are wonderfully presented, like the stories of the migrant women, their context within the narrative is unclear and serves little purpose.

The only member of the family directly affected by Vera’s condition is Miriam, through whose voice Clanchy writes insightfully of a daughter attempting to discover her feelings for a parent who has showed her little love or affection, yet who now is totally dependent upon her. When Clanchy devotes himself to this aspect, especially during Miriam’s sessions with a counsellor, the narrative does take hold and is quite moving, yet too often other voices — especially that of Philip who has little to add, and of whom we have little care — intrude and distract from what could have been a heartbreaking tale of time slipping through a daughter’s fingers, just as Vera’s mind slips away into nonsensical ramblings.

On this score Clanchy as well falls into the trap of attempting to show that a sufferer of Alzheimer’s can think with clarity, so long as one can unlock the clues. Towards the end of the novel he allows Vera to give an unaffected monologue on her life, which supposedly gives the reader greater understanding of her previous ramblings. This approach may be effective when dealing with a person with an intellectual disability — where the mind is perhaps similar to that of a child’s — but it is far too romanticised for someone with Alzheimer’s. Clanchy here refuses to admit that the disease destroys the brain, and not merely confuses it.

The Hard Word, is a valiant attempt to understand the pressures Alzheimer’s can have on a family — indeed as much of the narrative occurs within the characters’ home,
a sense of suffocation pervades that replicates the stress the family members feel. Clanchy's narrative form and his desire to include big picture issues, however, leaves the reader wishing his attempt was better directed.