The characters are enticing and endearing, despite their flaws, and it is easy to understand their inability to cope with their world. Winch's style teases out the characters' plights, adding substance to their actions as May swirls around in stories of the past and the present; the good and the bad; breathing and not breathing. The imagery is exquisite despite the hard times, absorbed in childhood innocence and discovery, finding beauty, and ultimately making sense of it all. *Swallow the Air* is an accomplished first novel.

Gillian Barrett

REMEMBERING

Deborah Robertson. *Careless*. Sydney: Picador, 2006. 295 pp. AUS $22.95. ISBN 978 0 330 42235 2.

Deborah Robertson's *Careless* is a novel full of death and loss. It should be a dark and daunting read, but it is not. Essentially it is an optimistic book which, while it explores the depths of grief and exposes a plethora of cultural inadequacies and clichés, still manages to convey an overall feeling of hope, a sense that grief can be endured and, eventually, survived.

Robertson interweaves the viewpoints of several characters to explore the experience of grief, how to support the bereaved, and the problem of commemorating those who are lost. Eight-year-old Pearl is the sole survivor of a murderous rampage by an estranged father. Her five-year-old brother Riley was one of eight victims: six children, including the man's twin sons, and two adults. Through Pearl's eyes we experience a child's view of grief, both her own and that of others around her, and are led to query many of society's ways of dealing with loss.

Pearl lives with her mother Lily in a state of chronic poverty and disorganisation. Pearl understands the finality of death: "There will be no new memories of Riley ... One day she will have remembered everything," (165), but Lily's grief is inarticulate, as chaotic in some ways as her life, but no less profound. Thus she sobs wordlessly, tells Pearl she knows Riley is still around and playing tricks on her, and keeps Riley's ashes under her bed, telling Pearl they will "do something nice with them one day" (80).

Through a victim's support group Anna Zanetti, whose twenty-two-year-old daughter, Tania, was murdered by her boyfriend, is appointed as the family's counsellor. She shows Pearl and Lily photographs of the Memorial to the Unrecovered, erected to remember those, like Anna's daughter, whose bodies were never recovered. Yet the one thing Anna wishes to do is to donate a wooden seat to the park where Tania played as a child, but the council will not allow her to do so. Others had made similar requests and "[w]e cannot meet one, without having to meet

them all" (82). A public body in fear, perhaps, of a tidal wave of grief.

Questions of private versus public grief and memorials are central to this novel. Anna may not be allowed to remember her daughter with the memorial she desires, but the killing of six children (the two adults appear to have been forgotten) and the public meeting held to plan a memorial for them reveals much about the public need to Do Something. A letter inviting Lily to a meeting of stakeholders is riddled with jargon and media-speak and is far removed from the bleak reality of six violently slain children. Why stakeholders, ponders Pearl, "why, when there were so many words to choose from, would someone use one that obviously made you think of barbecues, or killing vampires?" (119).

Also in the audience is Adam Logan, who achieved a brief fame by creating a sculpture using a cast of the body of a young heroin addict. Hoping to win the commission for the memorial, he has attended the meeting to learn about grief, "to find what is universal in their experience; the particular is of no concern to him" (127). Despite his self-absorption and apparent emotional coldness, Adam's vision is in some ways as clear as Pearl's. Adam himself raises the question of whether selfishness such as his is necessary to produce art: "It seems he has a chip of ice inside him — but perhaps it's what art requires," he speculates (153). Yet Adam has his own shadows that distort his vision and eventually, perhaps, destroy that which he seeks. As with Lily, Robertson's portrayal of Adam flirts with stereotype, but explores the character in a way that takes the reader beyond the sphere of easy moral judgements.

Adam has obtained the use of a workshop owned by Sonia Marstrand to prepare his bid for the memorial. The workshop was that of her craftsman husband, Pieter, and Sonia is still immobilised by grief a year after his death. She has attempted to deal with his loss by clinging to the things that belonged to their life together, particularly the bed he made for them, but memorials, including a painful retrospective exhibition of his work, bring her little relief.

It is a measure of the subtlety of this book that even the most tragic loss is not unremittingly bad. For several of the characters there are changes that bring a degree of resolution and new directions. Similarly, the novel does not condemn. After the death of the children the estranged father is the focus of public shock and outrage: an expert in a blue bow-tie pronounces on the psychopathology of the murderer's shaved head; others blame divorce; a bereaved parent declares him a "sicko" who carefully planned his crime. But Pearl, because of something she saw, views him differently, although it is not until much later she is able to reveal what she knows, and then in the most unlikely setting.

At first reading the ending is disappointing, but on rereading it

underscores the vast gap between public memorials and the actuality of individual grief. It suggests grief may be too intimate and too profound to be addressed by a universal panacea. Earlier in the novel Pearl, when shown the photograph of the Memorial for the Unrecovered, is unimpressed. Memorials should make you sad, she thinks, and this one does not. She is unable to ask the question she wants to ask, *"What if you don't like it?"* (127).

Careless presents a multi-faceted view of grief. The book is not dominated by a sense of blame or outrage, or a desire for vengeance. It is sensitively and evocatively written and deals with the deeply traumatic issue of loss and the response to it in a thoughtful and ultimately positive way. If there is anything to criticise it is that changes of viewpoint occasionally break into another character's thoughts. This can jar, but it is infrequent and a minor fault.

Jane Frugtneit

DESPITE THE TIMES, ALERT

Paul Mitchell. *Awake Despite the Hour.* Victoria: Five Islands Press, 2007. 72 pp. AUS $21.95. ISBN 978 0 7340 3694 0.

Paul Mitchell is a Melbourne based poet and fiction writer who has won numerous prizes for his writing. His collection of poems, *Awake Despite the Hour,* displays an intellectual vivacity as well as a deep interest in religiosity. Both these observations mirror Mitchell's keen interest in the poetry of Kevin Hart. Indeed, the final title poem in the collection, "Awake, Despite the Hour," carries the epigraph "after Kevin Hart."

The epigraph to *Awake Despite the Hour* is from Anna Kamienska's frequently anthologised poem "Those Who Carry": "Blessed are those who carry / for they shall be lifted." Mitchell adopts the theme of redemption that Kamienska's poem epitomises, yet at the same time he questions humankind's motives for creation. Words are clearly important to this poet, a fact evident in the eclectic poetic structures that his work demonstrates. Many poems exhibit local idioms, an example being "Contact." Like "Faultlines" and "Essay after Interest", "Contact" is a prose poem replete with irony. The poet/speaker conveys the idiocy that the proliferating technological modes of communication reflect. The conversational poem mimics an exchange between two people: "Did you get my email? No where'd you send it? To your work address. I'm not on that address. Are you on your home address? Yeah, but I didn't get a message. I got your text. I didn't send a text" (13). Essentially "Contact" asks why, with so many options to choose from, we are still