

Australian Fiction

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by Meredith Jaffe

Review by Caroline Baum



You don't have to be a green-fingered gardener to appreciate the poison ivy tone of this social comedy about the tensions that can erupt between suburban neighbours. It's a perennial favourite for writers - fertile soil for satire and conflict. Botanically speaking, Jaffe is of the same popular species as Liane Moriarty: let's call it by its Latin name: *Hortus Nastys Domesticus*. A deceptive native shrub with dangerous spines concealed beneath showy blooms.

Secateur sharp snipings erupt between older resident Gwen Hill (you can tell her age from her name - no one is called Gwen these days) a gardening columnist, and the new family that moves in next door with all their superior attitudes on show. Their number one failing is that they are clearly not gardeners. Francesca Desmarchelliers is a pressured professional who has moved her family out of the city following her husband Brendan's affair. But the change of scenery has done nothing to restore family harmony.

Before you can say xanthorrhoea (that's grass tree to you non-gardeners), a fence goes up between their two properties and war is declared. Mediation follows. While Frankie plays dirty, embattled Gwen is faced with an increasingly confused husband Eric, who embarks on a snail farming project although it is his skill making dollshouses that attract the two little girls from next door.

Jaffe has a keen sense of how small hostilities can escalate into full out turf warfare and how poisonous it can be living next door to people who don't share your values. Her mischievously acute observation will resonate with anyone who's been involved in a border dispute.

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