
Wendy James knows contemporary Australian suburbia and this is the setting of her most recent novel, *The Mistake*, a psychological thriller laden with family conflict. In it, James shatters the routine of domestic life by unveiling her characters’ secrets and betrayals, and in so doing she critiques the values of a widening middle class in contemporary Australia.

*The Mistake* is James’ fourth novel and it follows *Why She Loves Him* (a short story anthology), and her novels, *Out of the Silence*, *The Steele Diaries* and *Where Have You Been?*, all published between 2005 and 2010. While this emerging Australian writer’s work teeters on popular fiction at times, perhaps even ‘soap’, her best work explores history and the intricacies of women’s lives and relationships with detail and honesty. Wendy James writes well and there is a hint of an Australian voice. This is comforting to an Australian readership, particularly women who enjoy family dramas and female-centred conflict.

On a surface level, James tells good stories. She appears to know people, women in particular, and she explores their ongoing concerns through construction of inwardly vulnerable characters exhibiting outward stoicism. In *The Mistake*, Jodie Garrow is a wife and mother in her forties. She has married into a middle class family but is always conscious of her working class roots and the dysfunctional relationships of her own family which she fears will compromise her newly-found happiness. James suggests that these roots cannot be escaped, for soon Jodie has to deal with past mistakes she would prefer to erase.

Initially, Jodie’s husband Angus and children Hannah and Tom are unaware that, in her late teens, an unmarried Jodie gave birth to a daughter whom she immediately adopted out in suspicious circumstances. The question of ‘what really happened?’ is a basic mystery convention, and one that James heightens to sustain reader interest despite the occasional lapse into melodrama. When Jodie’s past catches up with her, she is accused of murdering her baby; the media and local community pounces on ‘the story’ to punish an apparently emotionless Jodie. What happened to baby Elsa? Is Jodie Garrow really as she seems?

To outsiders, Jodie is a cold fish; her demeanour is marked by absences of emotion and warmth. The possibilities of Jodie’s negligence, and perhaps even infanticide, reinforce the ease with which society condemns more readily than it cares in matters of maternal responsibility. The judgment of women and mothers in particular, largely by other women, is conveyed through James’ carefully constructed sentences and word choice:

The affected indignation, the condemnation, the calls to bring back the death penalty, the comparisons with notorious murderers of infants – Kathleen Folbigg, Andrea Yates – or with those other infamous mothers of dead or missing children – all of them hard-faced bitches, all of them guilty, all of them heartless murderers of their own infants, wrongfully exonerated, protected by some powerful agent or other. (p.193)

Jodie is presumed guilty because the photographs propagated by the media show her unsmiling – a monster rather than a mother - and that Jodie now emerges as an image of middle class respectability positions her as an even greater target.

*The Mistake* doesn’t stray far from the formula of James’ 2010 thriller *Where Have You Been?* In this earlier novel, suburbia is depicted as a source of tedium for a mother whose life
is irrevocably changed when her long lost sister emerges from the past and threatens the comfortable predictability for which middle class domesticity is renowned. The Mistake too is suspenseful, but the narrative clichés and character stereotypes are there nevertheless. James presents two alternatives for families - brokenness or dreariness - and for people - loyalty and predictability or lawlessness and fun. These extremes generate conflict, action and intrigue in the novel but pose few legitimate alternatives for Australian suburban life.

Neither of James’ most recent novels meets the high standard set by her first novel. James wrote of Out of the Silence as the research piece for her PhD in Creative Writing at Deakin University, and was awarded the 2006 Ned Kelly Award for first time author of a crime novel. In this novel, James uses history to explore life today through ‘our human past’, in particular, the lives of women. It is based on historical figures, Vida Goldstein and Maggie Heffernan, and through developing these characters and their predicaments James highlights local anxieties about the roles and responsibilities of women. She critiques the complexities and limitations sanctioned by class while highlighting the differences between the social and moral landscape of the early twentieth century Australia and that of today.

Another of James’ novels, The Steele Diaries, is also based on historical figures, this time of the art world. It is inspired by actual events and real people, John and Sunday Reed and their adopted son, Sweeney, and poses alternative versions of family as it tells the stories of three generations of women and their struggles to balance the demands of motherhood and work. In the novel, Zelda is biological daughter of artists, Annie Swift and Ed Steele, who is adopted by her parent’s patrons. It explores issues of adoption and family secrets, as does The Mistake, but goes further to address the implications of the abandoning mother for both the mother and daughter. Far from being merely victims, the characters are agents of their own unhappiness, and in posing few solutions to domestic dissatisfaction, James represents Australian family life as largely miserable and painful for women in a range of contexts.

In ‘A Real Man’, one of James’ stories in Why She Loves Him, wife and mother Kathy finds bearing children a temporary absence from being herself. She happily returns to work soon after the second birth, relieved to return to her ‘true’ self. The story is narrated from the perspective of Kathy’s husband, Jeff and he reveals that his wife had never been sexier than when she was most overtly mothering. The spousal conflict emerging from this clash in values allows James to challenge the limitations and demands imposed upon women today. It also resists popular criticism that returning to work after bearing children is a form of emotional abandonment by (working) mothers, for Kathy returns to her hard, organised, well-exercised self who is confident and in control. This appears a satisfactory ending for her, but there is no such satisfactory conclusion drawn in The Mistake, in which no one wins.

Perhaps Wendy James’ greatest strength lies in the comments she makes on gender expectations, motherhood, and the ways in which a woman’s identity is so heavily influenced by the roles of mother, wife, daughter and sister. Her writing reaches the core of family conflict easily and naturally. James uses the form of the novel cleverly, with varied modes of narration to satisfy readers, including diaries, newspaper clips, letters, police statements, flashbacks, which blend together seamlessly, and despite some of her characters being read as stereotypes, their simplicity and familiarity enables James to appeal to a wide readership.

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