



Crafted tale's indelible mark

FICTION

THE FERN TATTOO. By David Brooks. University of Queensland Press. 374pp. \$32.95.

Reviewer: **DIANE STUBBINGS**

When his mother dies in a car accident on the Hume Highway, Benedict Waters is summoned to the home of a Mrs Darling, who claims to have things of his mother's that she wishes to give him. Eventually finding his way to the old woman's home, he realises that his "principal role was to be that of Audience: that, known or otherwise, I served as a kind of attendant vacancy, a fortuitous receptacle for whatever it was that she needed to rid herself of."

What Mrs Darling needs to rid herself of are stories, dating as far back as 1887, each story a complementary facet in a mosaic whose final pattern only truly becomes apparent when the last story is told. Or to borrow one of the metaphors that sit at the core of the novel – that of the great prism of lead crystal, itself made up of smaller prisms, that figures in the opening chapter, "The Lighthouse" – "they would all be put together like a huge puzzle, to make a great diamond that held the light inside it and had the power to turn a small flame barely as big as a child's palm into something thousands of times more powerful".

It's a description that can be fittingly applied to *The Fern Tattoo* itself, not merely a powerful book but one of extraordinary sensuousness and beauty. Published 12 years after his acclaimed debut, *The House of Balthus*, David Brooks's second novel is a stunning tale of the myriad layers that live within history and memory; of love, passion, and the deep shadows that lurk within any relationship.

Because of the nature of its telling, this is a book that doesn't lend itself to a concise summation, and even to attempt to do so would



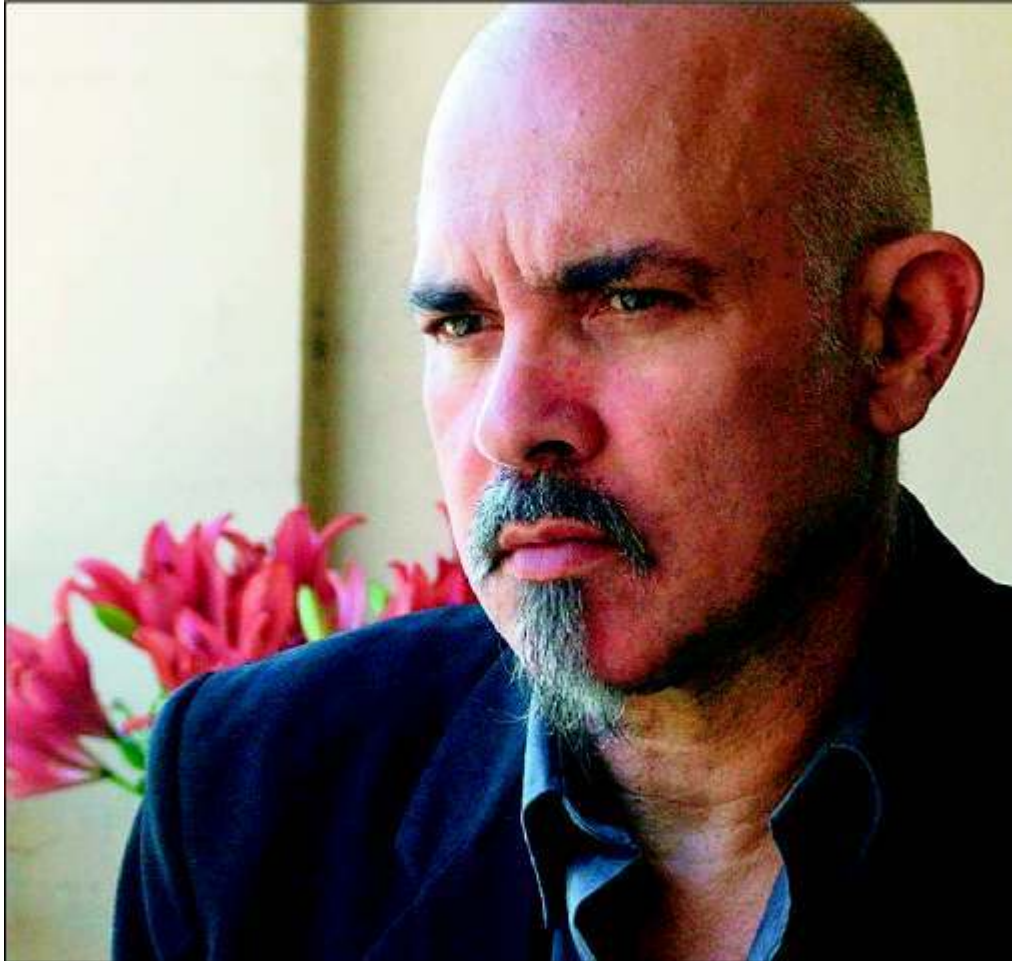
threaten the incredible delight there is to be had from experiencing Brooks's skilful unfolding of themes and images and secrets. Beginning with an almost archetypal tale of colonial Australia – about the building of a lighthouse on the South Coast of NSW – the

stories tell of young runaways, furtive pregnancies and untimely deaths. They tell of idealistic romances and disappointed marriages; of profound desire and enduring bonds of friendship. And they embrace an entire century of Australian history.

If there's one theme that binds together all the stories it's that of love, in all its confusing and startling aspects. Brooks takes us into "the labyrinths of the heart [that] defy analysis", and embeds inside each story a series of recurring notes – bower-birds, lighthouses, architecture, and ghosts lingering within the landscape – that deftly connect them one to another.

And there is the fern tattoo itself, begun on the right arm of a young librarian and growing over the years: "From her right elbow to her left, from her collarbone to the middle of her thigh, on her front and . . . her back also; on her breasts, her belly, and even in the most intimate of places, she was covered in a story. Not completely . . . but extensively, employing the features of the body as contours of a secret landscape."

Here, Brooks explores the very nature of storytelling, and reclaims the other stories, other histories, that are so often lost to more established versions of our pasts: ". . . perhaps at some point in every story – particularly in a longer story, a novel, for that was for a long time what I thought I was trying to make all this into – there's a place



David Brooks has followed *The House of Balthus* with an astonishingly good second novel

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where it confesses to the existence of all the other stories that have been held back in order for that story to emerge."

Benedict Waters, the novel's narrator, extols his readers to think of the book as a "collection of stories. The links coming, as they came to me, all in their own good time." And it's good advice. This is a novel that, as a reader, you just need to surrender to; to trust completely in its author, and let him take you where he will.

The Fern Tattoo is an astonishingly good novel, beautiful and wrenching in turn, and full of passages of absolutely luminous writing. It might have taken 12 years to produce, but this is a book that has been well and truly worth such a long wait.

Diane Stubbings has worked as a writer, researcher and academic.