



Sweet saga of women

by **Patrick Allington**

EARLIER this year, West Australian writer Tracy Ryan published *Scar Revision*, her riveting and vivid poetry collection. Now comes Ryan's new novel, *Sweet*, a claustrophobic but quite beautifully written saga about faith, organised religion, gender roles and suburban life. It takes time for the story to hit its stride, but persistence is worthwhile: Ryan's prose soon bristles with sustained purpose and intricate imagery.

Set in the 1980s on the fringes of Perth, *Sweet* is the story of three women – grieving teenager Cody, impressionable young mum Kylie and middle-aged Carol. Each of them is drawn to their Baptist minister, the Reverend William King, a spiritual leader whose vocation, or so he seems to think, is to be a puppeteer who directs his parishioners' lives. The women inhabit a world of prayer meetings, "giving testament", theological disputes, parish politicking and mutual support which sometimes seems caring and constructive, sometimes suffocating.

As if omnipresent, William appears like magic at key moments in his parishioners' lives. He's a wonderfully drawn character, pious and charismatic, fiercely anti-Catholic and possessing methods

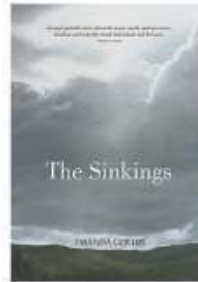


Sweet
Tracy Ryan
Fremantle Press; \$26.95

and motives that can border on malevolent – but he's also caring, hard-working and deep-thinking. He's a disquietingly magnetic presence: Cody, Kylie and Carol all struggle with issues that lead them to willingly subjugate themselves to William's wishes and beliefs – and yet they resist or question this loss of autonomy.

Carol and her husband, Horrie, plod along wearily, Carol attempting to avert her gaze from Horrie's distasteful demeanour. Kylie, meanwhile, must negotiate a truce between her new-found Baptist friends and her shearer husband, Mick, who doesn't want God-botherers dominating his family. Ryan appraises Kylie's and Mick's situation with tenderness and insight, although the dramatic resolution of Kylie's juggling act is one of the novel's few missteps.

Cody, especially, is fixated by William: "She both loved and



The Sinkings
Amanda Curtin
UWA Press; \$24.95

hated him at the same time." Her personal journey of discovery, emerging from a grief-induced fog to study theology even as she doubts her faith, and her struggle keep a lid on her feelings for William, forms a fascinating and complex portrait of vulnerability and strength.

Some readers may recoil a little from its bitingly disapproving tone, but Ryan has crafted a novel that confronts big issues and big ideas while remaining accessible and wonderfully alive.

Amanda Curtin's debut novel, *The Sinkings*, revolves around a brutal 1882 murder outside Albany. The surgeon performing the autopsy on the dismembered body declares the remains to be those of a woman – until authorities identify the victim as a man called Little Jock, a former convict. But Little Jock, readers learn, was born intersexed: not defi-

nitely male or female. Interspersed with the story of Little Jock's life and times – his traumatic childhood, his unavoidable, poverty-driven descent into crime and prison in Glasgow, his transportation and convict life – is the modern-day story of Willa. Her own intersexed child, Imogen, has damned her and left home. Still recovering, Willa grabs hold of the mystery of Little Jock's life and death as a sort of salvation.

There are many fine elements to this book. Little Jock's tale of rags, hunger, finding a family and protecting his secret is harrowing. Although Curtin often stuffs the narrative with too much historical detail, readers can still feel the dirt and the destitution.

Willa's story – her grief and guilt about Imogen's pain and anger – is wonderfully raw, although rather abbreviated. And Curtin draws neat, but not too neat, parallels between society's treatment of Little Jock and Imogen as specimens to be poked and categorised.

In contrast, Curtin recounts in quite ponderous detail Willa's efforts to research Little Jock's life. Readers follow her to libraries, archives, on to the internet and across the world to the UK and Ireland. Even when Willa stands at The Sinkings, the site of Little Jock's murder, there's a sense that this whole element of the story is superfluous. This somewhat dilutes what is otherwise a poignant and evocative work of historical fiction.