

Some wounds never heal

lucy
clark

Why is it that when fathers choose to leave their children, it's accepted as sad but relatively normal but, when mothers do it . . . well, hold back the tide of public condemnation!

It is such a highly charged issue. Does it mean that there is something more sacred about the mother-child relationship as opposed to the father-child relationship, or is it just that it doesn't happen quite so often?

It's an issue that's central to a compelling work of Australian fiction in which author **Kate Veitch** charts the repercussions of maternal abandonment in the lives of four adults.

In ***Listen*** (Penguin, \$32.95), Kate Veitch doesn't supply easy answers but the reader is left in no doubt that there is something particularly traumatic about being abandoned by your mother.

In the case of the four siblings — Deborah, Robert, James and Meredith, aged between six and 13 — the crucial issue is: not only did their mother leave them, but she disappeared, too, leaving agonising questions unanswered for decades. It is in this arena of ever-resonating emotional trauma that Veitch sets her engaging drama.

Listen opens on Christmas Eve in 1967, and a young English woman is unhappily enduring a sweltering Australian summer with an older husband who she no longer likes, and four young children she has no maternal instinct for.

The clues to Rosemarie's distaste for motherhood are immediately obvious: she thinks cruel thoughts about the "cheap little things" the children will have saved up to buy her for Christmas, and she displays a petulant streak that is usually the domain of children.

So when the children see a strange car pull into their driveway while their dad, Alex, is in the backyard, and see their mother get in and drive away without a backward glance, the scene is set for a lifetime of struggling to get over such a cataclysm.

Fast-forward almost four decades, and the children are grown. Deborah is uptight, angry, stressed in a high-pressure job in politics, and critical of her husband. Robert is a teacher, racked with anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive about order. James is a successful artist with less obvious but equally curious idiosyncrasies, while the baby of the family, Meredith wafts in the breeze and borders on alcoholism.

When their father, Alex — who has been the rock of their lives — begins to show signs of mental fragility and dangerous forgetfulness, they are forced to confront issues that pique tensions between the siblings.

Veitch crafts her characters carefully and cleverly, ably fleshing out the ways in which each individual has been affected by their defining childhood moment.

The narrative bounces between the present and the past, visiting seminal moments in the characters' emotional development, and always

present is the veil of painful longing for their mother.

When Rosemarie (inevitably) arrives on the scene — James rediscovers her in England through lucky coincidence — the hurt children within emerge, seeking the love and approval they have been denied.

All the manifold ways in which they have been affected mushroom like a nuclear cloud and there is anger and deep conflict of feeling.

Veitch's storyline veers into implausibility when James decides not to tell his siblings that he has found their long-lost mother, and keeps her as his secret for more than a year.

Nevertheless, there is much to think about with this novel, especially the notion of maternal instinct and how not so long ago many women — who today would be free to choose not to have children — were expected to have children whether they had the instinct and desire for it or not.

