Lost in the crowd

STELLA CLARKE

The Grand Hotel
By Gregory Day
Vintage, 480pp, $32.95

Indelible Ink
By Fiona McGregor
Scribe, 452pp, $32.95

Trust
By Kate Veitch
Viking, $357pp, $32.95

Speak to Me
By Sarah Hopkins
Viking, 305pp, $32.95

THE ideal of community might be a dead letter, endlessly circulated, never delivered. What does it mean? Suburban Australians dwell in block-obliterating homes, ignorant of neighbours but together in sport. Legions get virtual kinship via Twitter and Facebook. While a strong sense of community seems vital to personal fulfilment, it's hard to locate the real thing.

Of these four new Australian novels, Gregory Day's refreshing *The Grand Hotel* has the happiest campers. This is Day's third novel about a small rural community ("small" and "rural" are great restoratives for that moribund word) on the south coast of eastern Australia. Day shows how community means having a capacious sense of family, extending well beyond four walls. We are accustomed to soapy dreams of sea change, where shops are not consumer wastelands but chatty hubs where everyone's business is raked over. Day, however, transcends this soggy mulch with a resoundingly Irish take. The village of Mangowak finds spirited communion in drink.

Prodigious amounts of alcohol are consumed; even the tea has a kick. The locals don't get up at dawn's crack to jog to the office, they don't fret about their livers or their body mass index. They sing rousingly, love profligately, siphon off weekenders' water and invent silly competitions. They do so, however, not inanely, but with a covert political agenda.

Noel Lea is an artist in despair over the erosion of social life in Mangowak. When the story opens, he has gone bush, wooden with gloom. Yet the opening passages are a tonic, redolent of James Joyce and Peter Carey in their vigour and surreal edge. Lea is jiggled out his slough of despond by the absurd dance of a wandering brolga. Pepped up, he heads back to town, to learn that the council, in league with property developers, has permitted erasure of the town's only pub and pivot.

Noel opens up his unrenovated home, once the site of the town's original watering place before being destroyed by fire, and calls it, with irony, The Grand Hotel. In a fingers-up to all "excursionists" and developers, he boards up the windows with the ocean views and serves only locally brewed Dancing Brolga Ale, with just one daily dish to offset drunkenness. A dadaist loop plays astonishing snippets whenever the pub pissoir is in use. Let the shenanigans begin.

Day's eccentric characters really live, most of them, especially the gorgeous, buxom, jazz-singing Maria and the rude Lazy Tenor. Not all of them, though, have a pulse. He makes a bizarre decision to resurrect characters from the previous Grand Hotel's past, which is where the novel veers between dada and gaga. While downstairs is a riot, upstairs is a dream-like zone. An enigmatic breeze ruffles the figures in the old carpets and wallpaper, as Day evokes magic realism. The ageing town historian takes to his bed there, and as he sleeps, his transistor radio channels lively ghosts.

From that point on, Day contrives to run parallel stories. Grand Hotels past and present progress towards their blazing demise. This is where a light-footed, high-stepping tale gets too tall. However, the rejuvenating, unquenchable cheek of Day's pickled dadaist hobbyhorse pulls you through. You won't find a community with more vivacity depicted anywhere else.

Day's one serious grouse seems to be with real estate agents, a sentiment he shares with Fiona McGregor. McGregor is troubled by Australia's obsession with property ownership and wealth. The segregation of Sydney into economically determined units is a focus of her fourth novel, *Indelible Ink*. Having grown up on the city's affluent lower north shore, she has the inside running.

Property values can turn thriving neighbourhoods to stone; however, apparently subversive artistic acts can be a form of resistance against this petrifying obsession.

McGregor is also a performance artist. During the 1990s, she immersed herself in Sydney's

dance party culture, probing the "queer, transgressive and gendered body" experience that forms the basis of her earlier, unconventional and observant novel *Chemical Palace* (2002). McGregor is happy to pose as a social critic, however, *Indelible Ink* dares little in the way of radical critique beyond its riff on body art.

Well-heeled north shore matron Marie King, divorced mother of three grown-up children, sadly confronts the transformation of her beloved family home and garden into a high-end commodity. She puts it on the market, just as the downturn sets in. Her family's eyes are very much on that financial ball. Marie, meanwhile, in an alcoholic haze, distracts herself with her first tattoo.

This is a novel designed to appeal to Sydney readers. It meticulously depicts urban manners and fixations, the need to belong to the right economic tribe. McGregor is neither uncomfortably disapproving, nor too anxious to get a story told. *Indelible Ink* shows a woman becoming disaffected by her milieu. Marie's adventure with body art is partly a refusal of kinship with a pretend and pretentious social group, swapping it for the community that accrues around tattooing. Marie involves herself in the life of Rhys, her chosen tattooist, who introduces her to the carnivalesque release of the city's wildest parties (more authentic McGregor territory).

Marie might shock her friends, but her rebellion is effective only within a limited social context. Tattooing has in recent years achieved a fashionable, up-market profile, though not, apparently, in Mosman. Parlours turned to studios, tattooing jumped class to become a growth business. Postmodernists may view body art as a bid for permanence in a shifting reality, but only money buys it, as it has always bought status-defining works of art. As a private revolution, however, its significance goes deeper. By the addition of such markings, Marie is, inversely, stripping away the layers of social camouflage endemic to her position in Mosman, revealing herself to herself naked, via a private symbology. When she opts for inscriptions of ornate flora, she commemorates her garden and asserts the ascendance of spiritual over material concerns.

Still, Marie's studio visits alone could not have sustained the novel. It achieves gravity when Marie discovers she is fast dying from cancer. She initially notes how "chemotherapy was like a crash course in exfoliation. She looked luminous", but as her illness progresses, and her tattoos proliferate, the journey away from her former self gathers pace. Marie becomes addicted to her endurance art, until she is almost completely covered. The juddering of the interlocking cogs that make up her identity, the ravages wrought on her body image by disease and the control she assumes over this disintegrating self by the repeated inscriptions of tattoos, all of this is compelling.

Christos Tsiolkas has written that Marie "is destined to become one of the great characters of Australian literature". McGregor's exploration of a mother's attempt, belatedly, to create an independent self, even as she confronts death, certainly claims your attention.

What is not terribly satisfying is the vapid treatment of family and friends, and the saggy dialogue. Marie's daughter Blanche can't tell whether to abort her career or her baby. Marie's son is too preoccupied with his go-nowhere affair to take notice of anything else. Her other son Leon is struggling with sexual issues. Climate change and drought create noises off, part of an endless muddle including which pair of jeans to buy alongside which car is the lesser form of carbon treachery. Marie's illness barely penetrates the screen of their concerns. Possibly, this is indictment enough, yet McGregor's neutral handling of Marie's milieu still seems like a missed opportunity; their vacuity should matter more.

If Day and McGregor suggest that writing about revolutionary artistic acts is as effective as producing them, then Kate Veitch's *Trust* locks this in. A Melbourne mother, art teacher and nice person, Susanna Greenfield finds her comfortable life is falling apart. Suddenly, home, family, loving husband and steady job cannot be taken for granted. Her husband is exposed as a compulsive philanderer. Her mother is killed and her daughter Stella-Jean, a perky, embryonic Stella McCartney-ish fashion guru, is injured in a car crash. Her son is struggling with sexual issues and her career as an art teacher is faltering because she has forgotten how to be a proper artist.

For traumatised Susanna, this concatenation of events is the trigger for achieving self-knowledge. Being a dutiful wife, mother and daughter is revealed as a self-sabotaging, delusive condition (in feminist terms, nothing new). She heads for her local artistic community, and from out of this fire arises the phoenix of the self-defining, independent woman. Enough already of being nice; Susanna opts to shock on canvas.

Veitch's narrative verve and understated human insight make this novel, her second, highly engaging. Susanna, her mother, sister, children and autistic nephew are absorbingly drawn. Susanna's priapic catastrophe of a husband Gerry and her sister's creepy, child-abusing lover speak and behave like people you might know, and shouldn't trust. The evolving dynamic between Gerry and Susanna is deftly handled; he is not unduly demonised, despite the feminist subtext. Susanna has been a pleaser and caused his narcissistic, competitive, blokey ego to thrive. Veitch is a generous storyteller, whose essential warmth vitalises her characters and embraces the reader.

Susanna's deliverance into true artistic self-expression is plausible in a contemporary way. Having endured trauma herself she tunes into her private repertoire of the worst imaginable betrayals, from Australia to Rwanda. She creates confronting works that make her name as an artist. Ultimately, her liberation is assisted, in traditional fashion, by a timely inheritance. However, Veitch displays a finely tuned understanding and enjoyment of Susanna's innate capacity to move herself hopefully forward.

Sarah Hopkins, however, in *Speak to Me*, is not interested in massaging your yes-we-can button, but in a species of emotional waterboarding, in salutary misery. Possibly this is due to Hopkin's

experience as a criminal defence lawyer. Where Veitch's teenage girl sews merrily in her room, Hopkin's teenage girl is self-harming and suicidal. Veitch's problem husband is a charismatic man slut, but Hopkins's is blinded by a brain tumour. Hopkins does not go easy on her readers, as you'll know if you've read her first, critically acclaimed novel, *Crimes of Billy Fish*.

Speak to Me traces the dispersal of a family, Michael, Elizabeth and their children Charlotte and Daniel, first into two camps, and then into isolated, uncommunicative units. The catalyst is Michael's illness, though Hopkins, who is psychologically astute, shows that the tragedy intensifies tendencies already there. Elizabeth neglects her family, having become a full-time defence lawyer, to everyone's resentment and the detriment of her mental and physical health. Michael, his ego crippled, uses his daughter as a crutch. Charlotte hates her mother and her life. Daniel watches things fall apart and tries to get help from God. That's just the good news, the bad news is worse things happen to other people.

As a psychiatrist, Michael deals with cases of maternal psychosis. As a lawyer, Elizabeth is struggling with the case of an impoverished man accused of drug smuggling, whose eldest daughter was prostituted and murdered. None of this really helps them out at home, but it does reinforce the novel's general gist, as Elizabeth says, "some people have such miserable f . . . king lives".

While Hopkin's persistent focus in *Speak to Me* on private pain and family dysfunction seems sepulchrally mature in comparison with the other novels discussed here, it reads as young adult fiction. It is the sort of angsty fare, with its focus on adult (metaphorical) blindness and teenage vulnerability that is offered to readers lost in the dark forest of growing up. It has that whiff of sociological catechism. Hopkins dwells ominously, throughout, in the present tense ("At the end of the day, Charlotte walks away from her friends and communes with the dead girl . . .").

It is not that the internal wrenchings of her characters are boring. They are presented in a wholly searching, heartfelt way; it's just that they are unrelentingly forlorn. Even after the novel's final crisis, when a remedial dose of sex and love is handed around, the author understands her characters better than they do each other and there is meagre catharsis.

In the face of such apparently generalised family dysfunction, the quest for the holy grail of community expressed in these novels makes sense. *

PAUL NEWMAN

The locals don't get up at dawn's crack to jog to the office they don't fret about their livers or their body mass index