



FICTION Three Australian novelists take differing looks at life, love and history,

writes **Juliette Hughes.**

When the story is the magnet

The Woman in the Lobby

By Lee Tulloch
Viking, \$32.95

Nocturne

By Diane Armstrong
Fourth Estate, \$32.99

The Steele Diaries

By Wendy James
Vintage, \$32.95

LEE TULLOCH'S *The Woman in the Lobby* is about the kind of person to whom rich men have constant access, the high-maintenance women — predator or prey — who sit in swanky hotel lobbies waiting to be picked up. Women who play in these elegant leagues have to be either very tough or emotionally numbed.

In her essay *The Masculinization of Wealth*, Gloria Steinem argues that rich women have gender-based problems that are often more severe than those of middle-class women. The main problem is the ethical and emotional dysfunction of their husbands and fathers.

Wives of rich men are routinely treated as incubators for the next generation of the rich men's dynasties and are usually expected to bear serial infidelities without complaint or retaliation. To be Caesar's wife is all very well if Caesar is a decent bloke but too often his sense of infinite entitlement causes him to treat all around him as commodities.

Violet, the lobby-sitting woman of the book's title, has elected to enter this world and become part of the serial infidelities of many.

Tulloch is an accomplished writer who makes you care what happens to a somewhat irritating protagonist.

It's quite an achievement as

identify with the ravishing Violet of the violet eyes, perfect body and Titian mane. But Tulloch is subtle. We see that Violet's beauty has been a social handicap since childhood. Years of getting one's lunch-money pinched by jealous schoolmates might be good for the figure but might also make one into a magnet for the kind of man who has potency problems caused by an inability to relate on any but the shallowest of levels.

This is what Violet settles for after being dumped in turn by her selfish husband and the hulking tennis champion to whom she turns on the rebound.

At times *The Woman in the Lobby* feels claustrophobic, as coldly tasteful as *Italian Vogue* and as worldly cynical as one of those Benetton ads that feature a dying AIDS victim. Violet is conscious of the chaotic world of the poor. Her job, before she opts for prostitution, was something to do with a global charity. Yet the world she chooses to inhabit is parasitically luxurious. In the end Tulloch shows us the world through the eyes of someone who has become a luxury item herself and whose shelf life is reaching its end-date.

Tulloch is skilled enough as a storyteller to keep the story moving despite using the present tense, which can slow a book's pace to glacial. She switches between first and third person, keeping enough authorial distance to give an intelligent, global perspective on the luxuries and protocols of people-trading. It isn't easy to depict shallowness without moralising. Letting things speak for themselves artfully is an art that Tulloch masters here.

If *The Woman in the Lobby* could be classified as chick-lit with extra lit, then Diane Armstrong's *Nocturne* is more in the blockbuster-with-extra-heart category. Armstrong survived as a Jewish child in Poland because her family was able to masquerade as Catholics. They came to Australia in 1948 and she has written

several non-fiction books about the Holocaust, including her family memoir, *Mosaic*.

Memoirs don't always reach the younger reader. It's becoming increasingly important that the stories of the Holocaust are told before the last survivors die. Easy-reading, racy novels such as *Nocturne* are one way of keeping the history alive. One of the lesser-known stories of the Holocaust is the role played by young women in the Warsaw revolt that erupted a year after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

The stories are extraordinary — fiction is always going to say less than the shattering histories. But Armstrong has a straightforward, open, storytelling approach that will attract a readership that may have had little exposure to the Holocaust. Through her central character, the young Elzunia, she explicitly points the story with resonances from *Gone with the Wind*.

If it seems a strange comparison (Scarlett O'Hara, after all, is on the racist side of the conflict in her story), it actually holds up. The parallels are there as a pleasurable trawl for anyone who wants to follow Armstrong's hints.

At the beginning of the war, dreamy teenage Elzunia, who believes she is a Polish gentile, discovers her Jewish origins when she is betrayed and sent to the ghetto along with her mother. She is captivated by Adam, a Polish airman who ends up in England with many others of his kind. Like Scarlett dreaming of Ashley Wilkes, Elzunia dreams of Adam and he becomes a barrier to other relationships. But there is much more to the book than romance. It is, after all, an account of Warsaw under the Nazis.

There are some welcome, decent gentiles in it, although Catholics from all over Europe, not just Poland, have tragically little to be proud of when looking back at the Holocaust. Armstrong keeps us turning the pages and may well introduce a new readership to a story



that must keep on being told.

Wendy James' *The Steele Diaries* begins promisingly. When Ruth Howatt is searching through her recently dead father's things, an old acquaintance of her dead mother, Zelda, turns up and asks about her diaries. A search begins for the truth behind Zelda's death.

The diaries begin with the voice of the 14-year-old Zelda, funny, articulate and well imagined. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that it is inspired by real events in Australia's art history. Rich and

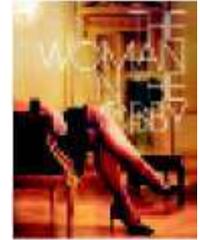
privileged art connoisseurs Julia and Paul Holland have adopted Zelda, child of the ferociously talented and chaotic-lived artists Annie Swift and Ed Steele. The parallels between this and the real story of John and Sunday Reed and their adopted son, Sweeney, are patent.

Annie's life story and letters as depicted here bear many comparisons with those of Sweeney's biological mother, the artist Joy Hester, wife of Albert Tucker.

The trouble with this is that although the story is engaging (at

least while James is writing in the persona of a diary or letter writer), the debt that the novel has to the Reeds' far more vivid real-life story is all too apparent.

One can't help doing a compare-contrast between the two narratives, but the original is so compelling that moving the action from Melbourne to Sydney and changing some details doesn't help the novel, which runs out of energy as the persona writing the diaries becomes older, more self-conscious and dull.



Diane Armstrong (above) and Lee Tulloch (left). Pictures: Edwina Pickles and Jacky Ghossein.