




Fun for the family

 THE New Age young man of fiction is a bit different from his 1990s counterpart. He's older, his recreational substances of choice are milder and taken somewhat less to excess, and he's more into mateship and whimsy than sex and self-destruction.

The characters in this gently comic, surprisingly tender first novel by Sydneysider Matt Howard – **STREET FURNITURE** (Wakefield Press, \$29.95) – are all 29 and happily unemployed.

Their day starts around noon and is structured around joints rolled from the carefully dried leaves of the balcony pot plants and visits to the pub for VBs (or "beviess"). Friday signals fish and chips with the family, and the highlight of the fortnight is a splendid nosh-up at the Golden Food Star's all-you-can-eat bar on pension day.

While the novel's main focus is on Declan, the group revolves around Smithy, whose penchant is for rescuing the lost and protecting the weak – from Declan who was picked up at a bus stop by Smithy and his mother at the age of eight and never went home again, to childlike Jeff and pregnant Maya.

Jeff is the first to go after a job, briefed by the others on the names of exotic fruit in preparation for an interview at a city fruit stall, but a swinging tragedy destabilises the little family and pushes Declan into the path of a series of opportunities.

A job as a publicist in a trendy publishing company hilariously results, and what started out as a scam leads to a lifestyle, new and enlarging friendships and a romantic interest, all of which Dec juggles conscientiously with his old loyalties.

Full of old-fashioned family values in spite of the marijuana and the dole, *Street*

Furniture is a most engaging debut – a warm, funny, soft-hearted novel extolling the pleasures and responsibilities of friendship and the surprising rewards of self-belief.

John Charalambous's first novel, **FURIES** (UQP, \$22.95), also focuses on the modern family in one of its many guises, and is unusual chiefly in the fact that although written by a man, its characters are predominantly strong and capable women. Its theme of parenting is very much from a woman's perspective.

Nicky Daniels is an art teacher and girls' welfare counsellor at a Victorian rural high school.

Her life, once wrested from a suffocating Greek childhood and dedicated to utopian ideals, has stagnated in the conservative dailiness of a country town. Her students' mothers, the Furies or Eumenides of the title, eye with draining disapproval her relaxed lifestyle and her relatively permissive raising of now teenage Imogen – the baby she inherited after the suicide of Imogen's mother.

Charalambous interweaves the story of Imogen's origins with Nicky's own childhood and fight for autonomy and with the day-to-day events of the hot summer that at last sparks Nicky's restlessness and makes her determined to escape from the backwater in which she is listlessly letting the pair of them founder.

His characters are convincing, as are his portrayals of country-town personalities and politics. If his voice is not yet particularly distinctive, it is clear and serviceable, and his prose style is pleasantly literate.

Katharine England



Adelaide Advertiser
Saturday 25/9/2004
Page: 9
Section: Arts & Entertainment
Region: Adelaide Circulation: 277,146
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 444.42 sq.cms.
Published: Daily

Brief: UNIQ-PRESS
Page 2 of 2



COMFORTABLE Matt Howard makes an engaging debut