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# Country stars in brilliant debut

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TREAT . . . first-time author John Charalambous

**N**ICKY Daniels is taking her 15-year-old daughter Imogen for a driving lesson on the outskirts of their country town when she idly observes the sparse spring growth: “‘Very dry,’ she comments, as if either of them could give a f--- about the farmers.”

It is indeed true that most people don't care about farmers, although given the farmers' constant whingeing, who would ever dare admit it?

A writer, that's who; a good writer.

This may be John Charalambous's first novel, but by the time you get to the bottom of the first page you know you are in for a rare treat – witty, honest and intelligent writing that's actually about something, in this case the vicissitudes of family life

The Greek Furies were the implacable police of family duty, and it's fascinating to see this unfashionable concept worked through in a modern Australian setting, where families can be anything and nothing. The unhappy daughter of strict Greek parents, Nicky Daniels ran away from home when she was a young girl and underwent a series of reinventions.

By living with an adoptive family she was able to stay at school, go to university, fall in love with an artist and end up in Rushburn – as a hippie.

With the spasmodic assistance of several hangers-on, she and her husband built a four-roomed mud-brick house and called it a commune, in this case the optimistically named Deep Spring Community. The

promise of an old spring, originally tapped by Chinese market gardeners,

never was fulfilled. Of the members of the commune Nicky was the only one who struck a blow. Her teaching income kept them in books, paints, music, food and alcohol. They did, however, manage to grow their own dope.

One by one they left, including Nicky's husband. Nicky was left literally holding the baby, but not her own. Imogen, the child she loves, is the daughter of an absent father and a mother who committed suicide. After the commune collapsed Nicky attached herself to the family of the town and that was when she became a respected art teacher.

With a population of 900, Rushburn no longer has an Apex Club or a Young Farmers and the bush is crawling with sun-addled, crazy men who wave metal detectors about and sometimes guns.

Charalambous describes the life of the dying town in devastating detail. Many of the teachers live in Bendigo and make a daily round trip of 200km rather than live in Rushburn. The locals, naturally enough, resent their lack of commitment.

Some of the older teachers have stayed on; but the rewards of contributing to a small community are rapidly diminishing.

Nicky's closest friend, Kate, is a fellow teacher and she's the real McCoy – a local; a local who is supporting her husband and propping up the family farm.

Still living in the crumbling mud-brick house, Nicky works hard at school. She's the backbone of the tennis club, paints in her spare time and, when convenient, late at night, she has it off with Pug Illingworth, the town's mechanic.

But above all Nicky looks after

Imogen, who is so immersed in the town's culture that she wants to make her debut.

Deb frocks aside, Imogen has few expectations of life other than grubby sex with the gang down by the local reservoir.

Nicky knows that she must now take Imogen away to Melbourne. Nicky would also like Imogen to know one thing – that she wasn't always this woman; that “when she was young she loved without reservation and expected to be loved in return. It's her cherished conception of how a young woman should be – brave, idealistic, unwilling to compromise”.

Nicky's quest is to save Imogen before the Furies strike them down. When they find out Nicky is leaving, the members of the tennis club, her school colleagues, her best friend resent yet another defection. But that is the way of country towns – people come and you love them and then they leave you.

John Charalambous has written an extraordinarily beautiful portrait of a woman and by the book's end you wish her well; you wish her fresh springs of life.

**Furies** by John Charalambous (University of Queensland Press, \$22.95).

Di Dempsey is a reviewer based in country Victoria.