



OTHER VOICES

Tony Maniaty

AS drought continues to buckle the nation, Eva Sallis's *Fire Fire* (Allen & Unwin, 217pp, \$24.95) underscores existence beyond the urban sprawl with the fragility of family life: in this case, the Houdinis, an antipodean version of the Swiss Family Robinson. Pa the viola player and Acantia the painter abandon the "great world" to raise their myriad children on a farm deep in the bush, with a house of "five corners, four useable rooms, three chimneys, two doors, one toilet and no plumbing". The children hear Pa practising nine hours a day ("his slow decline kept tempo with their fading certainties") while their own day begins with instrument practice, animal husbandry, home skills, physical education and eurythmy. But darkness slowly envelops the Houdinis, whose offspring wonder "what secret, silent bomb had blown them up when they weren't paying attention".

As their many utopian enthusiasms turn sour, Sallis creates haunting vignettes that accumulate like undergrowth, heading for conflagration.

Skip the laborious first dozen chapters of Robert Brunton's *Golden Pavilions* (Pandanus Books/Australian National University, 405pp, \$29.95) and enter the novel proper as brothers Teddy and William Brown (in fact, exhibition designer Brunton and his designer-sibling David) win the contract for Australia's pavilion at the 1966 Asian Trade Fair in Bangkok, an exercise in Cold War rationale. "The Western powers feel that if Thailand's economy can be bolstered," says Australia's trade commissioner, "its people will be less likely to be tempted to fall to the Red Peril". But good intentions aren't always enough there.

In Bangkok, the airconditioning and water supply are problematic, though neither generates much tension, and while

drinks at the Oriental, diversions in a war-torn Vietnam and pretty bar girls add colour, Brunton's busy narrative runs short on emotional clout.

Girls' welfare co-ordinator at a small-town school, Nicky employs "the country knack of drowning everything in irony" but still hasn't come to terms with one life that's going nowhere: her own. In John Charalambou's *Furies* (University of Queensland Press, 315pp, \$22.95), Greek-Australian Nicky finds herself "leaping between roles: teacher, mentor, legal guardian, sister, pseudo-mother", trying to make a better woman out of Imogen, her charge and pseudo-daughter. "Where's the sensitivity and wisdom, the welling self-belief she'd recognised in the very small child?" Instead, Nicky is left "feeling somehow implicated in the girl's taste for degradation". The fusion of these two awkward, dependent souls drives this first novel along brilliantly.

A thesis is a labyrinth, Barbara Marchant decides. She's been locked deeply inside hers for years, to the point where her sexual life is non-existent, her only real contact is with her supervisor Professor Wilenski ("who seemed addicted to obscurity"), and her footnotes are now twice the length of the main text, the title of which is *The Dysfunctional (Family) as Signifier*. But Barbara, the loquacious, wonderfully nutty narrator of Matthew Karpin's *The Thesis* (Kardoorair Press, PO Box 478, Armidale, NSW 2350, 73pp, \$14.95) isn't about to yield to commonsense or the calendar. She hopes for success so she can build "a very large house on a very large property and become absolutely isolated". Author Karpin — writing his own PhD at the University of New England in Armidale — captures, in his tightly sealed comic monologue, the madness and small joys of being a signed-up member of this "industry of extraordinary superfluity".