



The Trouble with Fire
by Fiona Kidman.
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Reviewed by Isa
Moynihan.

Fiona Kidman's latest collection signals a new direction for the format of New Zealand short stories and confirms a trend that has been growing for some time.

First, the stories are becoming longer. In 2006, as editor of the third annual collection of *The Best New Zealand Fiction*, Kidman suggested that the word limit usually required by competitions did not allow for "more adventurous stories". Instead, the format demanded "a single emotion, a single incident, and a shock or a crisis as its resolution." So, in *The Trouble with Fire* the eleven stories range in length from 20 to 38 pages. There are multiple characters, incidents and layers, often with an indeterminate ending, and the stories are told in a series of quick-cutting scenes as in a film, a break from linear narrative that occurred some time ago, beginning with the flashback.

The developments are necessarily inter-related. Without time to develop characters and theme, the cinematic technique could produce the effect of an aimless switching from one set-up to another. In the hands of skilled writers such as Kidman, however, the result is a colourful variety of scenes and characters presented in the kind of fast-moving story-telling we enjoy in well made films.

The collection is divided into three parts, beginning with six stories set in today's world,

and ending with two based on incidents on the nineteenth century lives of Gordon Coates when he was New Zealand's Prime Minister, and of Lady Barker (she retained her title in her second marriage to Frederick Broome), author of *A River Rules My Life*. The middle section comprises three interrelated stories and covers 88 pages with a Dickensian tangle of dark secrets, misunderstandings, adoptions, bleak settings, murder and wills. Even the fires burn underground.

Kidman's dominant theme, as usual, is the female experience. We are reminded of a time, not so long ago, when girls and women were strictly controlled in how they behaved, and punished if they disobeyed the rules, not by having their noses cut off, or by being lashed if they drove a car but by being socially compelled to have an abortion or give the 'illegitimate' child up for adoption, and then lead lives of quiet desperation after marrying whoever would accept 'damaged goods'. For the conformists education was just a stepping stone to a better marriage, and only unmarried women had careers, usually as teachers or nurses. All so familiar – perhaps too familiar.

Only in "Heaven Freezes" are the status roles reversed and it is the husband who has to fit in with his wife's work arrangements. The title refers to the day a strange blue light appeared over Wellington, and may be a sly reminder that "when hell freezes over" is used to describe a highly unlikely event.

In Part 3, "Fragrance Rising" touches on Māori-Pakeha relationships with each other and with the government led by Gordon Coates: one relationship is summed up in the closing story, "The Trouble with Fire", when Annie Broome/Lady Barker says, "We try not to burn stands of ti-ti palms, but now and then one gets in our way."