



Rising to the Surface
 by Latika Vasil.
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 Reviewed by Sue
 Wootton.

The 15 stories which
 make up Latika
 Vasil's strong debut
 collection, *Rising to the
 Surface*, are beautifully

encapsulated by the cover image, "Swimming in the Living Room" by Michael Soppitt. Vasil's stories are peopled by folk either swimming in circles or floating adrift in their own lives. The stories begin when someone or something unexpectedly knocks a character out of the deeper tides and compelling currents of habit, offering them a chance to change tack, change stroke, even to completely change ponds. In story after story I could almost hear the rust creaking as personalities began to stretch. Vasil¹ writes this tension well, taking the question to the wire: will the person break or adapt? She has an eye for the "harmless enough eccentricity" which can end up, for better or for worse, dictating the course of a person's life. Many of her characters are doomed by their particular peculiarities of character to live a life other than the one they once imagined for themselves. How like most of us, then! Vasil, knowing this, writes with kindness. She can be funny and witty, but she is not cruel about failure or disappointment; she does not mock. The reader warms readily to the characters, even the ones with the obviously very annoying or self-destructive habits. My heart lifted and fell alongside every character's own rise and fall, a sure sign that I was hooked.

Vasil's characters are revealed through their obsessions. They collect things: postcards, suits, routines. They are also revealed through their convincingly individual voices, which Vasil projects onto the page according to their different levels of self-awareness. A few characters can offer a detailed analysis of how they prefer to live – non-spontaneously – and have some insight into the discomfiting effect of surprise. In "The sand mandala", the narrator, a person who plans

"weekends meticulously, carefully balancing chores, relaxation, and social activities", is willing to be thrown off course by a visitor who is passionate about impermanence. Others, like Lawrence Ford in the title story, "Rising to the Surface", are intensely sensitive to the slightest variation from a narrow band of routine, but are so focused on clinging to that zone of apparent safety they cannot bear to think about alternatives. In Lawrence, this extends even to language: "He didn't like being described as an insomniac. He preferred 'light sleeper'. Words were important and he hated ugly words, which included anything ending the suffix 'iac' – hypochondriac, kleptomaniac, megalomaniac – all hideous."

In "Postcard", Phil Chance is a man who appears to have missed his chance, his 'look' of "'has-been' rock star' having 'become fixed when he was around twenty". In fact his circumstances have not much changed. Chance "still has a flatmate, albeit a different one, and the flat was still a standard draughty dump, with badly painted walls, threadbare carpet, and balls of dust billowing like miniature tumbleweed down the long skinny hallway." I loved this image of the dust being blown this way and that by the draughts. It encapsulates, perfectly, not just Chance's lifestyle, but, of course, Chance himself. One day Chance (a postman) pockets a postcard he should have delivered. He is entranced and intrigued by the caption – "happy times in a Florida garden" – and by the "swirling young women in *Gone with the Wind* crinolines, twirling lacy parasols". This full and lavish image is a long way from the starved tumbleweeds in his cold corridor. Later, at the pub, Chance picks up a discarded *Racing Times* and comes across a racehorse with the same name as the Florida gardens. His luck has surely changed, at last. And indeed, good fortune comes his way, well, sort of... in his constricted tumbleweed kind of way he is blown somewhere a little short of the full dream, to a tourist experience quite a lot less romantic than "dancing among the azaleas and bougainvillea under a Florida sky".

Rising to the Surface is an intelligent, warm and charming collection. I recommend it.

1. Latika Vasil was born in India and raised in Wellington, where she currently lives. Her work has appeared *Landfall*, *takahē*, *Bravado* and *Slightly Peculiar Love Stories* (Rosa Mira Books), and she was a prize-winner in the 2011 NZSA Asian Short Story Competition.