



***The Families* by Vincent O'Sullivan. Wellington: VUP (2014). RRP: \$35. Pb, 251pp. ISBN 9780864739193. Reviewed by Jane Orchard.**

Vincent O'Sullivan's collection of short stories is, obviously, about families. The covers reflect the theme. The front cover shows three

chicks in a nest with a parent bird feeding them, and the back cover shows the protective wing, so the whole book is surrounded by the bird. We are held in a series of human nests that O'Sullivan photographs brilliantly.

The protective wing on the back cover, however, is not quite what it seems. It is raised to fly. People in these stories will fly in many ways – into new relationships and out of them, into maturity (often the 'other country' of old age) or just into and out of the past.

The people who live and breathe through these brief snapshots are middle-class New Zealanders firmly rooted in the familiar communities and landscapes they inhabit. Their habitat is painted in detail: a 'sloping section of lemon trees and camellias crippled across wire-frames, the pergola with its dense web of passion vines, and beyond that the thin arm of the harbour, the pines black as in children's drawings against the late evening sky' ("Keeping an Eye").

And here we are, we Kiwis, described as newcomers see us: 'It was the mildness of the people too that came back to her, the quieter voices, the hesitancy, the sense with her family, perhaps especially, that there was the slightest distance between them. Intimacy was something you worked at, that could never be assumed' ("The Families"). On the other hand, middle-class life in this country, its 'plain of boredom', can drive you even to crime ("Pieces").

The problems of old age are a particular focus of the collection. "Keeping an Eye" is the saddest, most hopeless, for me but these situations occur for many of the aged. O'Sullivan gives glimpses into a future we may wish to plan differently for.

The title story is set halfway through the collection. It introduces us to two parents/grandparents and their daughters, especially to one of them. It examines how the parents deal in their different ways with the daughter who has come home after breaking off her engagement. We meet, through her experience, the family of the man she loves and the reasons why their marriage wouldn't/won't work.

O'Sullivan brings in little hints of his other stories as we learn that '[h]appiness is a matter of a well-conducted truce.' Many of the stories reflect this.

Kirsten's students, '[c]lever, good-natured girls, and all of them shocked, amusingly enough, when they first read together the final section of Gulliver's Travels, appalled at Swift's being so destructive about mere reason.' Neither Kirsten, nor the others painted in the collection, are governed by reason or the emotional barrenness Swift saw as its result. These gently struggling, ordinary people are interesting because of their foibles.

In "Mrs Bennett and the Bear", we see fleeting experiences of love mirroring trapped bears, tearing themselves to pieces, unable to soar like the hawks, but Edward has also taken pellets from Keiko's hand and soared in the rain for the seconds that will nourish the rest of his life. The glimpses in some of the stories are haunting.

With 14 stories in 251 pages, there's no room in each to delve into characters and their histories yet each is credible. Characters coalesce quickly. In "Daddy Drops a Lin", we are told: 'he is more like half a dozen profiles drawn on separate sheets of transparency paper that do not align exactly. Placed one on another there is a blur of lines and the truth is in the blur.' For stories which mock images, it's not too bad!

The stories have a very real intimacy. The writing is understated but true to our lives. We are part of these conversations: they affect us; they depict us.

O'Sullivan's work, *The Families*, is easy to read and often hard to put down. I was always tempted to read just one more story before we put the light out.