



Sydney Morning Herald
Saturday 12/4/2008
Page: 31
Section: Spectrum
Region: Sydney Circulation: 364,000
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 159.98 sq.cms.
Published: MTWTFSS-

Brief: UNIQ-PRESS

PICK OF THE WEEK



THE YOUNG WIDOW'S BOOK OF HOME IMPROVEMENT

By Virginia Lloyd
UQP, 266pp, \$32.95 (hb)

A poet can sometimes say in a few words what it takes a prose writer an entire book to convey. This is, with some important reservations, the fascinating case with this deeply moving and unflinchingly honest book about love and death. The Natalia Ginzburg poem *Memory* at the beginning of the book captures, in 22 lines, the essence of Virginia Lloyd's story of how, aged 32, she met an Irish Londoner, John, went on a honeymoon and then got married, and 11 months later was a widow when he died from cancer.

Books in this "cancer death" genre are, for the most part, frighteningly sentimental. They often read like tearful funeral orations. But Lloyd writes beautifully. She explores her emotions with controlled frankness, she recalls her love and the pain of her partner's death with meticulous and deeply caring detail, and she structures the story so brilliantly that the title actually becomes part of the reality.

Resisting the temptation to underline the obviousness of the metaphor, she describes how, after her husband's death, she notices that she has rising damp in the home where she had loved and cared for him. She decides, as part of the grief process, to get the house repaired and so the book is partly about bringing an old Victorian terrace in inner Sydney back to life and partly about watching and loving someone who is departing from this life.

The power of the story lies not in the events – too many books have been written already about people dying from cancer – but in the great humanity and honesty of Lloyd's account of falling in love. She tells of how she was happy to marry someone she knew would probably die and about the reality of trying to get a life back into some kind of order, to give it some kind of new meaning.

This book is both profound and universal. It is a truly remarkable piece of writing, which should be read by everyone who wants to understand the mysteries of love and death.

Reviewed by Bruce Elder