

BY STEVE WALKER

Water works

Short stories exploring love in all its guises.

Linda Niccol's second collection of short stories, *The Temperature of Water*, looks at love in many forms – frustrated, re-ignited, thwarted, found or just plain ordinary. Like her first collection, *The Geometry of Desire*, it is by turns comic, poignant, reflective and didactic. Its predecessor impressed with its sharp handling of dialogue, its sense of a visual dimension and its intelligence, and from those perspectives *The Temperature of Water* will not disappoint.

The title story is a good case in point. It cleverly weaves the sensitivity to water into all its strands. It starts with a dream of a symbolic storm at sea as a redundant journalist grapples with his new situation. He then goes for a swim, comically losing his pants in the process. He does have a novel idea, however – the “sea harrow”, which will churn the differently heated waters of the ocean. His pregnant wife learns that the baby does not appreciate hot baths. Husband pursues his dream, oblivious to the safety of the newborn. In an emergency, husband loses his religious faith but normality is restored.

The story reads like a film synopsis – unsurprising, as Niccol is also a screenwriter (whose credits include *Second-Hand Wedding*). The dialogue crackles with a sense of the real and Niccol constructs each scene around a powerfully envisioned picture. The result is a clever and moving little fable, which opens the anthology briskly.

Another strong fable is *Poppy*. Luke, a young shop assistant, falls in love with Poppy, who has Down syndrome. The tale follows their story of love thwarted by social pressures but, in the process, draws a sharp moral lesson in tolerance. Again, it is the dialogue that illuminates their plight.

A third story of a fraught relationship



New romantic:
Linda Niccol.

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is *Carol, Unplugged*. Carol, once a corporate go-getter, is now an invalid, frustrated and embittered at her situation. Her husband picks her up from the home where she lives to go for a drive. An accident at a rail-crossing prompts him to consider an opportunity for merciful euthanasia. The story forces us to consider the value of a life beyond the economic.

But not all the stories are as effective. Some are thin and inconsequential, such as *Fog* and the rather twee *Monarch*. Characters can lack dimensionality or the tale just not amount to much.

At times, a story can descend into the tendentious: in *The Flood*, it takes an old man to reveal to the heroine the value of happiness in a marriage.

The worst of the flaws, however, is the shoddy proofing – a fault that bedevilled *The Geometry of Desire*. Both Niccol and

we deserve better. A pity, as at its best this is an inventive, diverse and finely crafted collection. ■

THE TEMPERATURE OF WATER, by Linda Niccol (Silver Owl, \$29.99).

Steve Walker is an Auckland reviewer.

