

Natural-born talent shows how it's done

Beautiful prose, used without heroic machismo, signal the arrival of a writer for our times.

Review by David Messer

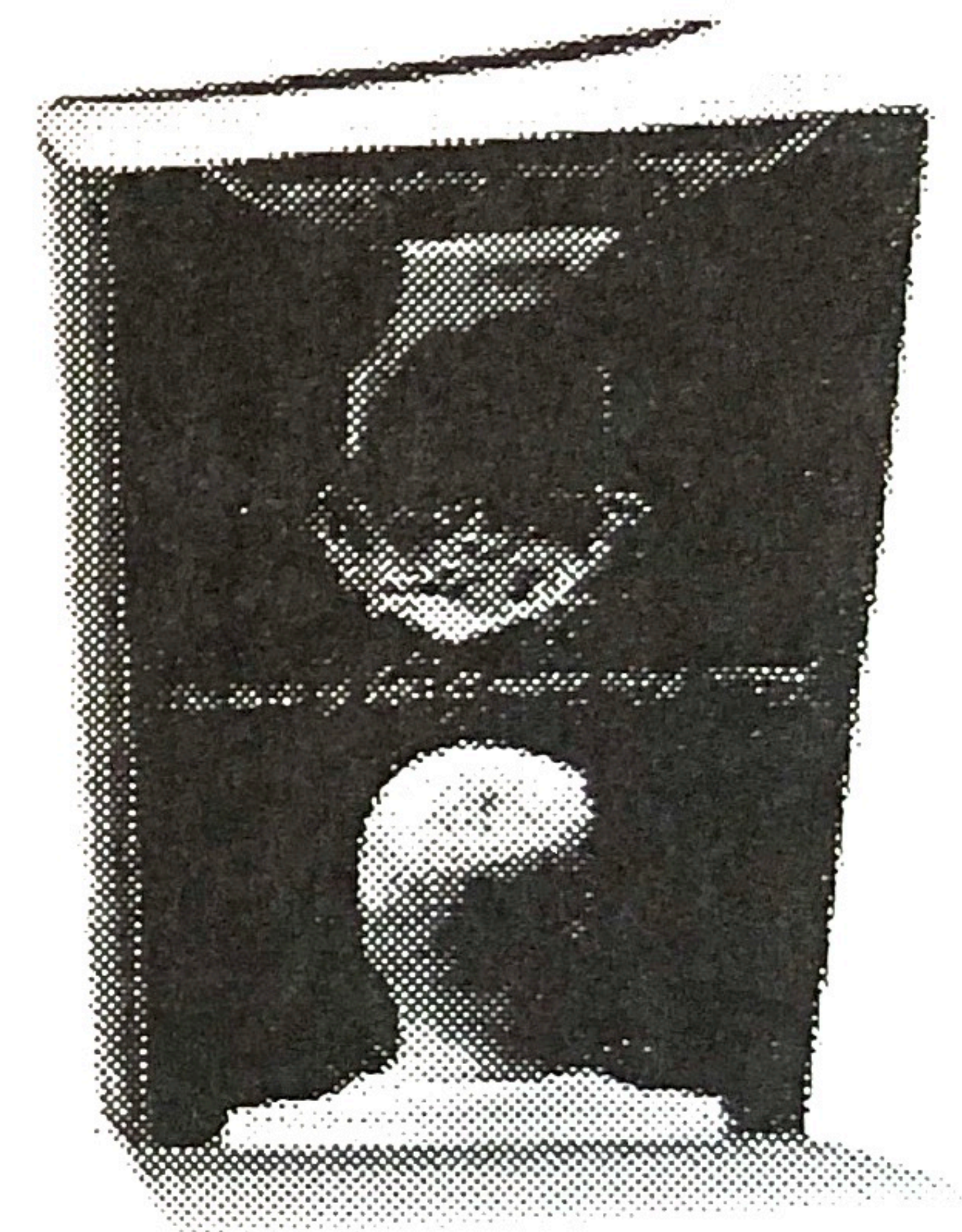
Despite the gradual Americanisation of our culture, some things have never really taken off here. American football or the right to bear arms are a couple of examples. However, while surely we are better off without gridiron's interminable stop-starts and the US's murder rate, one area where we could still learn something is in the appreciation of the short story.

Of course, having a population – and subsequently sales – 15 times larger than ours means that, inevitably, those operating on the periphery of the mainstream have greater opportunities. Perhaps it is this, rather than any substantially different cultural perspective, that explains the flourishing of short fiction in the US. Australia has always had short story writers and still has plenty of literary journals where the format is published. But the readership of the latter is small and Australian book publishers usually regard

the short story collection as a non-seller. Certainly, we have no equivalent to outlets such as *The New Yorker*, nor do our writers get the kind of opportunities presented to Andrew Porter.

Not that Porter is undeserving. In fact, quite the reverse. This collection, his publishing debut, reveals an extraordinarily talented writer. The term “beautiful prose” is used too freely but it really does apply here. Unlike many writers who have a love and understanding of language, Porter avoids long descriptive passages or the use of arcane words. In the long American tradition traced from Hemingway through Sam Shepard, Raymond Carver and Richard Ford, Porter uses words with great economy. That he does this without any of the heroic machismo of that tradition truly makes him a writer for our times.

Writers' debuts so often rely on autobiographical elements, giving the books a persuasive veracity but one that is hard to repeat in later

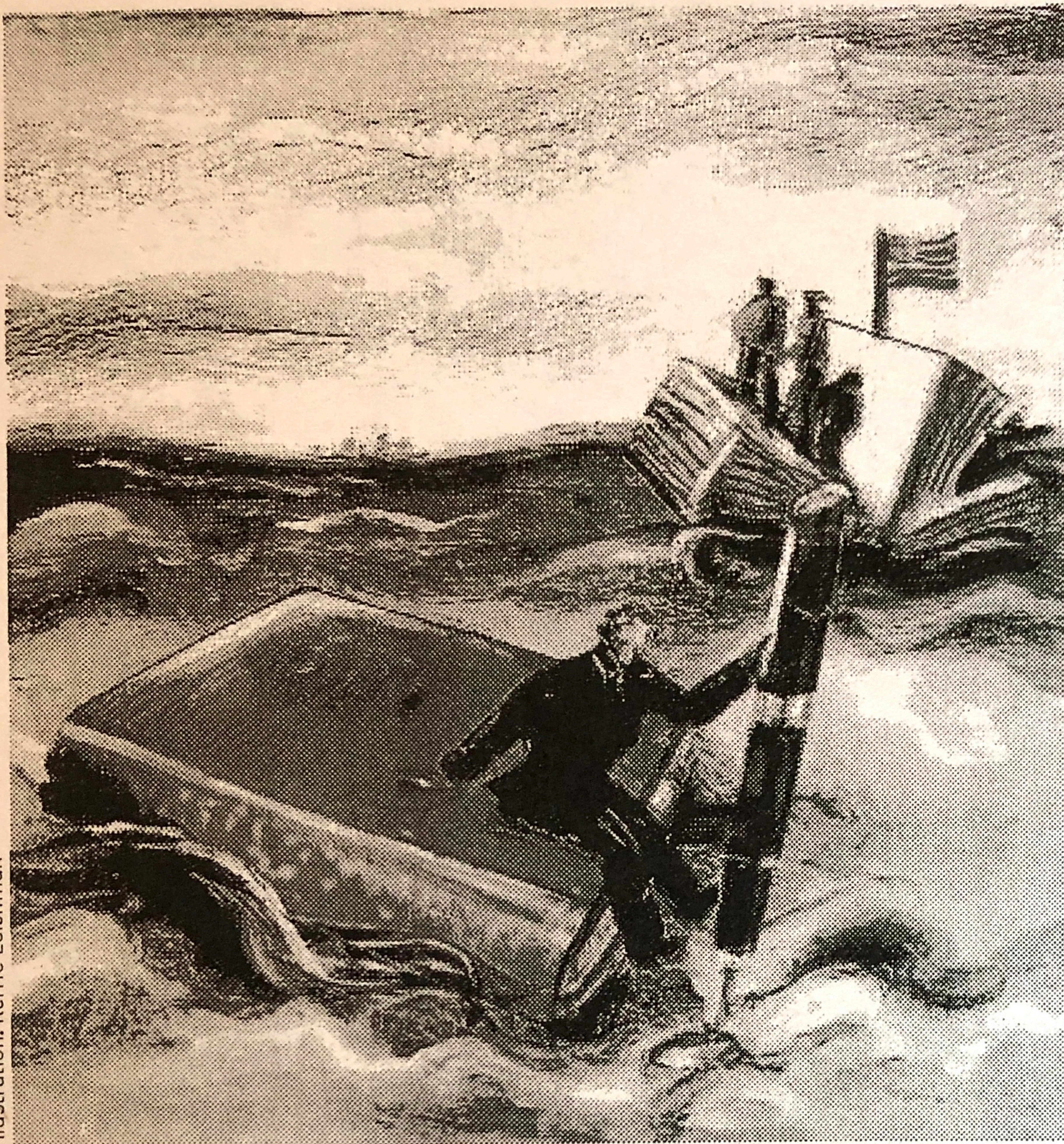


Short stories

THE THEORY OF LIGHT
AND MATTER

Andrew Porter

Text, 178pp, \$27.95



works. *The Theory of Light and Matter*, however, is certainly not this kind of book. The 10 stories here are far too varied in their subject matter for more than one or two of them to be based on personal experience. In *Departure*, the narrator reflects on a year as a teenager when he and a friend made hesitant romantic contact with girls from a nearby Amish community. The narrator of *Azul* is the husband in a childless couple who host a foreign student as part of a flawed attempt at pseudo-parenthood. In the story that gives this book its title, Porter switches gender and has a university student, Heather, describe her romantic but

unconsummated relationship with her middle-aged physics teacher, Robert. Other stories concern the son of a failed documentary filmmaker, memories of a child's death and the friendship between a lesbian and her neighbour who helps her out by pretending to be her boyfriend for the benefit of her father.

Porter is impressive with his ability to deliver each of these wildly differing stories with equal conviction and unpredictability. It is almost astonishing that these narratives, bereft of violence, murder, mystery or obvious humour, are so readable. Porter takes potentially banal scenarios but relates them with such nat-

uralness, unpredictability and lack of cliché that the resultant stories are hard to put down.

Just how he does this is something of a mystery but only partly so. In terms of the characters he writes about, it is almost as if he chooses them at random and relies on arbitrary juxtaposition, viewing them with a certain neutrality but never cynicism.

As for the quality of his prose – which is very much the key to the brilliance of these stories – Porter has explained his technique in interviews. He doesn't plan out a story beforehand but writes quickly, with little reflection, which accounts for the convincing naturalness of his work. Later, he painstakingly rewrites and edits, leading to the technical flawlessness of these stories. We can only hope that this approach continues to reach similar heights for many more books to come.