



City's souls lost and saved in the flood

Stella Clarke

Floodline

By Kathryn Heyman

Allen & Unwin, 256pp, \$29.99

NOT post-apocalyptic but postdiluvian; not tomorrow but today; not bleak but certainly uncomfortable, Sydney writer Kathryn Heyman's fifth novel has a parable-like quality reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

Floodline, however, is not so much a shoot-me-now, futuristic, imaginal endgame as a poke at archaic superstitions that may, for the religiously inclined, lurk just below the surface of our climatically besieged consciousness.

The scene Heyman sets, of a drowning city, covers visually familiar ground and makes an urgent context for the stories of personal growth that unfold in the novel. The fictional city of Horneville could be Brisbane, Calgary or Passau. Most likely, it is modelled on New Orleans. Mikey Brown, the main character, sets off on a mission to help save the victims of this flooded metropolis. However, she is carting along with her something more essential than a trailer-load of doubtful care packages: her faith.

Mikey hosts a Christian shopping channel typical of the cheerfully obscene mating of spirituality with commercialism apparently rampant in the US.

Calamity is, as ever, conducive to the harvesting of souls. Despite rational takes on such catastrophic reminders of our mortality, ignorance and prejudice along with suspicions of vengeful forces inevitably float to the surface somewhere.

Mikey also has a more personal agenda. She has two young sons, whose odd names are

plucked from biblical sources, Talent and Mustard. She once had a husband, their father, Scott Brown, but he was swallowed up by Horneville years ago. They all suffer from his absence, but Mikey knows more than her bereft sons about where he has gone.

Horneville, named with Chaucerian chutzpah, looms as a modern-day Sodom in the sights of the Christian communities around it, and is the regular host of a huge gay mardi gras. Scott Brown left his family to visit the city, to do God's work amid the depraved hordes, and never came back.

When, on the eve of the year's planned mardi gras, Horneville is inundated, this is a gift to Mikey's church, NuDay, an organisation hopping with fire-and-brimstone evangelists, peddling the view that homosexuality is a "filthy sin". So Mikey sets off, packing the Word of the Lord.

Yet, rather than being a retributive deity's emissary, she turns out to be on a journey towards tolerance and forgiveness.

While Mikey's quest has some emotional charge, ramped up by the novel's hostility towards groups of God-botherers with ante-diluvian attitudes to same-sex celebrations, the more interesting, ethical core of the book concerns the flooding of the city's hospital, Roselands.

Heyman flips the story back and forth between Mikey on the road, and Gina, an emotionally calcified nurse facing down a medical apocalypse. This doubling of focus puts some strain on the narrative (as also was



the case in her award-winning 2006 novel *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*), but the two stories do finally connect.

An excoriating drama unfolds around Gina in the failing hospital, which could have been expanded into an intensely focused and grimly compelling novel in its own right. Heyman vividly records the dawning of crisis, followed by unspeakable disaster. The hospital and its staff are deprived of the means to cure and care, then of the luxury of allowing patients to live at all.

Who is worth saving? Who deserves to survive? Who is too *Gilbert Grape*-fat to go out the door?

Terrible choices must be made, with a stock-taking level of efficiency. Labels are scribbled and hastily pinned to chests. No 1 means you have a chance of being airlifted out of a once-sterile building that is becoming a putrefying morgue; No 3 means you don't.

Heyman's narrative trajectory remains indomitably redemptive. The hospital is the purgatory that damaged Gina must traverse to retrieve her full humanity. *Floodline* is, overall, concerned with the personal revelations attained by a cast of vulnerable, flawed and credible characters. In the end, though, it's the potency of her depiction of a Hippocratic tragedy that really steals the scene.

This novel taps into contemporary qualms that bloom with every report of unprecedented disaster. Is the line that separates our technologically evolved existence from dystopic social collapse really much thinner than we imagine?

Stella Clarke has lectured in literary and cultural studies in Australia and Britain.



Kathryn Heyman has written a story of personal growth amid crisis