

BOOKS



Anne Coombs **Glass Houses**

The cast of Anne Coombs's final novel, *Glass Houses*, is extensive. At the centre is Raymond Tyler, a wealthy, single man in his early 60s, rather reclusive and nervy. He lives in a derelict Gothic mansion over the River Glass, which he has bought outside a country town, Glaston, to be near his friends. A retired antiques dealer, Raymond is restoring the house meticulously, inch by inch, day by day.

His father, Sir Anthony, was a powerful figure in Tasmania – their little piece of England – and Raymond grew up in the early 19th-century family mansion, Bamford, pampered by elegance, beautiful gardens and servants before he was shipped off to board at Geelong Grammar. Nothing is simple for Raymond: all is quiet passion and confusion.

His younger sister, Lillian Tyler-Watson, in her late 50s, is just back from New York, where she has lived the glamorous life of a rich American for decades. Her husband has recently died and she is short of money. She moves into her Darling Point apartment and refuses, out of nostalgia, to sell the one in New York. She constantly fights with Raymond over his sale of Bamford and refusal to share the proceeds.

And then there are Raymond's friends: the entire Queen Street, Woollahra circle and the Glaston community: gardeners, booksellers, a newspaper journalist, a shonky renovator, the very proper Philip Dexter who learnt his antiques trade from

Raymond, and the flamboyant Theo Roth, a Sydney real estate dealer who covets the mansion, Glastonbridge. Phew!

The commentary of the narrator is threaded through the story in italics. She has also apparently come late to Glaston, though she has long family ties to it. It's hard to see where she fits in, but that is only another part of the maze.

Glass Houses is a satirical novel, the posthumous publication of Coombs's final book. It is funny, sensitive, sharp-edged in a gentle kind of way and a pleasure to read, reminiscent of the writing of the vastly underestimated British writer Barbara Pym.

Coombs's thorough understanding of the nuances of psychology and of social interactions, including of the power struggles contained within the most intimate friendships and social relations, allows for many enlightening – and often funny – moments.

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