

SE **M** - arts
HD **Disconnect lingers beneath laughs**
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LP
BOOKS
ANALOGUE MEN

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Nick Earls, Random House,
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One of Australia's most beloved authors, Nick Earls made his name with summery comic tales of tongue-tied romantics, showing particular ease at depicting men infatuated with, and slightly intimidated by, women who are better at life than them. Among his fine work for young adults, classics such as *After January* and *Monica Bloom* have a disarming straightforwardness.

His books are still promoted with the old "buy a Nick Earls novel and never be sad again" quote, but he has long since settled into darker territory, casting a wry eye over a world of middle-aged frailty, misplaced lust and frustration.

For someone who has been named a national treasure, he is still often taken for granted. Perhaps it's his approachable prose and his knack for the comedy of embarrassment, but both belie his willingness to dig deep into contemporary malaise.

Analogue Men centres on bumbling Everyman schlub Andrew, who has downsized from a highly paid, high-pressure role at a private **equity firm** to a "**company** that actually does something", a radio station. The new job allows him to spend more time with his increasingly distant family but it's an uneasy transition. His wife views him through the prism of his various embarrassing health ailments, while his teenaged children Abi and Jack are a mystery to him, communicating monosyllabically and rejecting his Facebook friend requests.

His father lives in a granny flat at their house and battles through his own health issues and faded relevance. Formerly a big star in radio, he now DJs at RSLs, introducing records with trivia and anecdotes about better days, hanging onto a time before the world stopped caring about him. Like Andrew, he used to be with it, but then they changed what "it" was.

Andrew's job mainly involves corralling a skeleton crew of staff and babysitting the station's "talent", Brian Brightman, a buffoon whose desperate skits about paedophile priests and children with cerebral palsy are measured by the station in terms of the social-media buzz they generate. While his headline-hogging antics ensure he remains a star, there is a sense he is the last of his kind, a dinosaur in an industry under siege from streaming services.

It's not just new technology that's an endless source of angst though, it's sexuality, and the often uneasy link between the two. When Andrew isn't inadvertently loading a video of a girl stripping on his phone, he's being asked to explain why he Googled "late-emptying penis" at work.

As with Earls' bittersweet *The True Story of Butterfish*, there's a dark well of illicit desire bubbling beneath the "two kids and a house in the suburbs" surface here as Brian lusts after young women while his own body declines in farcical and repulsive style. Meanwhile, some of the sharpest comedy comes from Andrew's attempts to impart his outdated knowledge about sex to his mortified children.

As is Earls' wont, this doesn't move at a cracking pace, preferring to linger on the little moments of awkwardness, the unfortunate misunderstandings and small but soul-destroying slights.

The action ramps up somewhat when it relocates to a **chintzy Gold** Coast holiday park, where Andrew scrambles to control the scandal-prone Brian as he prepares for a comedy debate in typically lunk-headed fashion. A farcical turn of events straight out of the *American Pie* playbook ensues, but even at its most scatological and slapstick there's something sombre beneath the laughs, a lingering sense of disconnection and decay.

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