Doc. (a novel)

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Dying Room. Was the Wyndham Native Hospital eugenic?

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Certificate of original authorship

I, Annabel Stafford, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctorate of Creative Arts, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney has been written by me unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. Any help that I have received in my research and preparation of my thesis itself has been acknowledged.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

Australia, 1937. To escape the fallout following a patient’s death, Ada Fraser signs on as ship’s doctor with a cargo vessel bound for London. One of the few passengers on board is another young woman, Eve Pope, who has been sent to sea with her aunt in the hope it will cure her of a mysterious nervous condition. Eve’s aunt makes it clear she doesn’t want Ada—or Doc, as she’s known on board—treating her niece, but Ada defies her and treats Eve in secret. As the Delphic makes its way up the ‘untamed’ North Coast of Australia and Doc journeys into Eve’s psyche, she begins to question her own faith in scientific progress—and the story she’s been told about her patient’s illness.

The dissertation examines the Wyndham Native Hospital, established in the Kimberley in 1937, as a window on the way eugenically influenced thought and policy operated in Australia in the first half of the 20th century. I argue the Hospital arose from a belief system that conflated Aboriginality with disease and infection and which devalued Aboriginal life, while at the same time viewing that life as economically useful. Through a conceptual framework provided by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and the Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton, I will conclude that the Wyndham Native Hospital was eugenic in the Chestertonian sense insofar as it treated the inmates as economic tools and sought to manipulate their fertility, health and dependency much as if they had been slaves.