

# Intolerance as ideology

Richard Allsop reviews

## *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness*

by Elizabeth Farrelly

(UNSW Press, 2007, 224 pages)

Perhaps surprisingly for somebody who is nominally on the 'progressive' side of politics, Elizabeth Farrelly is no fan of post-modernism, or even modernism. She doesn't even like the nanny state.

For instance, in *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness*, Farrelly laments literature's move from being 'the Victorian era's primary moral carrier to being, in the subsequent century, mere entertainment' and also the fact that the search for beauty is not only unfashionable in art, but considered positively banal. She argues that, while it originally set out to find real beauty, abstract art achieved the exact opposite. Indeed, it became 'so remote and inaccessible that most people saw nothing in it at all'.

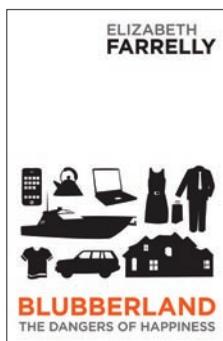
Post-modernism is also held responsible for the lack of respect for professionals such as doctors and architects and Farrelly believes that as consumers we are getting worse outcomes as a result. While many community groups opposing property developments demand more community consultation, as an architect, Farrelly believes that 'public participation is as likely to mitigate against good architecture and beautiful cities as against ugly or bad ones'. She argues, correctly, that 'legislation, especially planning legislation, must be as impersonal as the weather'.

This book does not have a clear thesis, rather being a litany of complaints against consumerism and ugliness in contemporary Australia.

But on aspects of certain issues, such as the environment and feminism, she can make acute observations. Farrelly points

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out that residents of New York are living much greener lives than 'hippies ... living in mud brick'. She also attacks 'victim mentality, nanny statism and the liability crisis that kills street theatre and removes play equipment from public parks' and ridicules one school's ban on kicking balls in the school yard.

However, the thought-provoking parts are heavily outweighed by this book's manifest flaws. It lacks a logical structure and the author is too inclined to use every quote and example she has ever stumbled across. To use one double-page spread as an illustration, the reader is taken from classical Greece, via the views of an eighteenth century commentator, through six modernist painters, to Ivan Illich, to Paul Keating, to a debate between varying views of architecture, to Lucien Freud, via passing references to Kate Moss, Jerry Hall, Princess Diana and Richard Alston. The net effect makes the book read like the end of a long, well-lubricated lunch—after most of the participants have evacuated to another table.

In the extensive list of quotes are several from *The Spectator*, including the likes of Paul Johnson, Petronella Wyatt and Mark Steyn. In the case of Steyn, Farrelly is either ignorant or mischievous when she interprets his comments on French friends refusing to visit the US because Americans are too fat as an attack on Americans. One does not need to have read much Steyn to know that it is, in fact, an attack on the French.

More fundamentally, the book suffers from an atrocious beginning and end. Farrelly begins by arguing that having lots of

stuff is not only not making us happy, it is making us unhappy. I just do not buy it. The people I see around, especially the younger people, appear far happier than my angst-ridden teenage friends did back in 1978.

Her claims about our alleged lack of happiness are not the only examples of creating facts to fit her argument. She twice claims that food allergies are the result of actions which 'over-sanitise childhood' when the experts, in fact, are still trying to discover what has caused the allergy explosion in the past three decades. Hers' is a plausible theory, but unfortunately once Farrelly gets onto anything relating to food, houses or the size of cars, she quickly becomes a zealot.

One source of our alleged problems is apparently having too much choice—'360 types of shampoo in one store'. It is funny how people who complain about capitalism delivering too much choice never advocate reduction of choice in the arts. There are already far more books published and pictures painted that anyone can absorb in a lifetime—why do we need any more?

Any semblance of this being a serious book disappears in the final chapter. Entitled 'I have a dream...' it tries to draw a post-catastrophic climate change scenario where 'rain hasn't fallen in the eastern half of the country for a decade' and most of us have upped sticks and moved to nirvana land in the Kimberley. This 'paradise' in her words 'hums with energy', but as you read on it sounds a most unpleasant place to live.

The ultimate problem Farrelly has is a lack of tolerance. One might very well share her distaste for McMansions, four-wheel drives, post-modern literature and abstract art, but hey, if other people think any or all of those is the way to happiness, let them give it a go.

And, if under her climate change scenarios petrol does reach twenty dollars per litre, people will choose to change their behaviour, just as now they somehow manage to choose a brand of shampoo out of the three hundred and sixty options.

