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## **FLYING LESSONS**

*By Susan Johnson*

*261 pp. Faber and Faber.*

Australian novelist Susan Johnson's affable American debut ponders whether in searching for ourselves we might look most profitably in the past, present or future. Ms. Johnson offers lush accounts of the quests for fulfillment of two restless women. Ria Lubrano "came into the world with bones plotting mutiny." Ria rebels against her "curiously empty" life in Sydney by escaping to the land of her ancestors, the tableland of Northern Australia, in search of her vagabond brother, Scotty. There, she falls in with a colorful caravan of vegetarian craftsmen and healers. Alternating chapters follow Ria's equally mutinous grandmother, Emma, who dreams of flying, and does in the face of her autocratic father's commands by marrying Catholic Sam Lubrano. Emma's flight echoes Ria's in an antique key. While each story may be too thin to sustain at novel length, both swell by the other's reflection. Casting rich period detail behind Emma and exotic place detail around Ria, Ms. Johnson persuasively spins braided yarns of two struggles against the fetters imposed on women of different eras. Her prose is charged with feeling, insight and rambunctious wit. Ms. Johnson sometimes relies on these alone to carry several pages at the expense of incident, and at such moments the respective quests drag. Ria's and Emma's shared desire to take wing feels so universal that it teeters between the powerfully revealed truth and the commonplace, evoking recognition but not surprise. The surprises lie instead in Ria's dawning awareness that "the eye that looks gets better at looking."