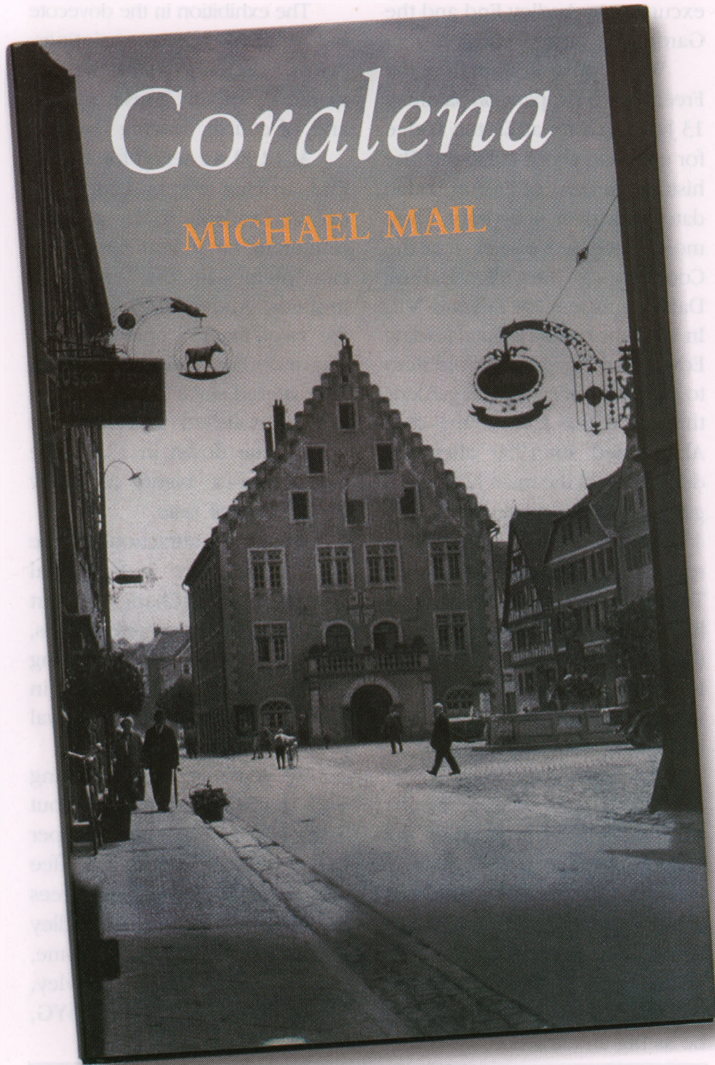


# First novel by Michael Mail

Suburb resident Michael Mail, whose prizewinning short story was published in Suburb News last year, saw his first novel in print in March. Coralena has been the subject of several good reviews in the nationals and is "an elegaic and graceful story of a house that holds a terrible secret of 1930s Germany". Suburb News readers can judge for themselves from this extract Michael has chosen to give the flavour of his book which is set in 1970s Germany.



would immediately erect in a neat act of sabotage. It made her appreciate the disarming circumstance of their meeting. Her timidity had been outmanoeuvred.

Dieter took the cigarette back from her. "Did I tell you that they persecute smokers?" he announced. "It's all in the house rules. Make sure you air the place before inspections."

"What inspections?" Sophia replied suspiciously.

"Do you think they'll leave you alone? They'll be keeping a close eye on you. That's what rules are all about - spying."

Dieter raised his long emptied glass with an air of smugness. Sophia considered that he'd deployed that demeanour with sufficient frequency to make it a definite character trait. He'd oozed smugness when he'd lectured her on the workings of the central heating, dismissing her questions on the confusing time switch.

"You look like a follower of rules."

And then he would end his posturing with a mischievous grin, a quest for forgiveness in acknowledgement of possible misdeed, and his intimidation would be checked.

It was now mid-evening and what had begun as a work break had stretched into something more final. Sophia was content to settle the first day's account on what were considerable achievements of transformation, considerably eased by Dieter's unexpected assistance.

Pancake consumption had originally commenced at the flat's small wooden table. However, the painful cracking sound that had been emitted when Dieter leant back on his chair had sent them both scurrying to the sofa, actually the sofa now turned and remaining bed, lest Sophia fail to execute the manoeuvre on her own.

Dieter had originally divided the pancakes evenly but Sophia conducted a well-received

redistribution based on the principle of need, and Dieter happily consumed the bulk. The wine was more evenly apportioned, although its effects apparently less so.

Sophia's light-headedness did succeed in emboldening her in the burgeoning flow of conversation. She still hadn't pinned down precisely Dieter's age. He looked young but was a practising lawyer. She put him six or seven years older than herself, around 28 or 29. He was conclusively unmarried and she had been closely monitoring his speech to pick up any references to girlfriends. She didn't ask him outright because that would have been too intrusive. She was trying not to be, while being as intrusive as she felt possibly able.

He spoke about growing up as the only child of the Coralena, which he described as a lonely experience. "No siblings, many parents." Which he went on to rephrase as, "no playmates, many bosses." He became far more animated when talking about the nei ghouhood itself. Sophia came to realize that she had unknowingly signed up to some kind of introductory course on the delights of the Altstadt covering everything from laundry to bakeries to beer halls - tram routes and where to avoid walking at night. Sophia let him continue, enjoying the vigour of his presentation having long lost the capacity to retain what was being conveyed. He even took her to the window, pointing out boats on the river as if old friends at a party.

Dieter must have recognized the waning of his audience because he suddenly, simply switched off. They both stood before the window in silence absorbing the soft evening light. Soon, Dieter was announcing his departure and Sophia was expressing her gratitude. He offered to return.

"It's safe! No accordion music," Dieter joked as he stood in the landing. He had a final question. "You haven't told me your politics."

"I hate politics," Sophia replied with a swift honesty. Politics held one primary association for Sophia, the rantings of her father. "And you?"

"The Stones, Streetfighting Man." Dieter paused. He looked

disappointed. Sophia sensed she'd been asked something of significance and was regretting her off-hand reply. She had given the wrong answer. "So you're a bystander." Smugness, then that redeeming smile.

Sophia's exhaustion was now overwhelming. She undressed placing her clothes carefully on one of the wooden chairs, now under deep suspicion. She bathed in the cold water hopeful of Dieter's promise to fix the thermostat. The lumpiness of the bed contrasted with the familiarity of the sheets brought from home, her former home.

Next morning, Sophia awoke to her alarm's characteristic hysteria. She surprised herself by instantly recognizing her new surroundings. She had had a restless first night. Her mind was on the previous day's visitation.

She was experiencing sickly sweet sensations of the wildest fancy that brought her back to every teenage crush she'd ever had. The powerful glow of light from the windows was a welcomed distraction reminding her of the need to pursue the acquisition of curtains with Frau Eckermann. She got to her feet and walked to the window excited to demonstrate her solidarity with her new neighbourhood as it woke to a new week.

Marked on the window's inside, something caught Sophia's notice. It appeared to be some form of lettering plainly visible in the light condensation that clouded its periphery. She peered closer and made out a word - RAGE.

*Coralena, published by Scribner £15.99. At Josephs and other good bookshops.*

## A full season for HGSHS members

The Horticultural Society launched its 94th season on 26 March at Fellowship House with a very popular talk on Clematis, by acclaimed grower of climbing plants, Marcel Floyd.

May is a busy month for gardeners, and we hope to get you off to a good start with our annual Plant Sale at Fellowship House on 18 May (see 'What's On', page 9) - lots of professionally-grown bedding, tomato and other vegetable plants at great prices, as well as seedlings and cuttings grown by Suburb gardeners.

Last year we raised £500 for the North London Hospice and Dame Henrietta Barnett Fund by opening four gardens in conjunction with the Hampstead and Highgate Festival. We are opening four more gardens this year on 25 May (again, see page 9).

On page 7 you'll find an entry form for the Suburb's very own class in the 'Barnet in Bloom' competition, run by the London Borough of Barnet and sponsored by the Horticultural Society, which awards the Millennium Cup and prize

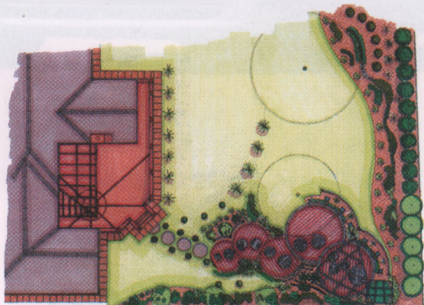
garden vouchers. With so many interesting and pretty gardens around the Suburb, it should not be hard to find competitors, so why not enter your garden this year? They don't have to be perfect, just interesting and attractive to look at. The closing date is 21 June and the only proviso is that the judges need to gain access to your garden on or around the weekend of 14 July. For more information or another entry form, ring Pauline Varnals at Barnet Town Hall (8359 2657).

And finally... if your children and/or grandchildren are looking for something creative to do, why not get them drawing, painting and growing things in pots or in the garden in time for the Flower Show on 29 June? Children receive free membership of the Society, with their own card. We welcome grown-ups too! It only costs £3 for single membership and £5 for double (phone Ruta Teteris on 8455 9944 for membership details and a handbook).

MARJORIE HARRIS  
HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY CHAIRMAN

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