



A media star gets a whiff of reality



Earnest work ... Wendt's subjects are like butterflies pinned to the wall.

The 'perfumed steamroller' emerges from her professional bubble to talk to ordinary people.

Review by Tim Elliott

What a strange book. The veteran journalist and TV presenter Jana Wendt has long been a feature of Australia's media landscape. As a reporter and presenter with such shows as *60 Minutes* and *A Current Affair*, the so-called "perfumed steamroller" interviewed prime ministers and presidents, taking it up in fearless fashion to everyone from Colonel Gaddafi to Henry Kissinger and Rupert Murdoch.

Her first book, *A Matter of Principle* (2007), explored the lives of similarly important and influential figures, including the art critic Robert Hughes, the feminist Camille

Paglia and the former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer. In *Nice Work*, however, she tackles a far more difficult topic: ordinary people.

As she explains in her introduction, much of Wendt's career was spent in a professional bubble, huddled in newsrooms or racing to interviews. She was paid to observe but only in a cursory sense, parachuting into other people's lives with notepad and pen and exiting as soon as she had the requisite "material".

TV networks and current affairs offices were her life, she writes, while "the working world outside was obscured by fog". What, she wondered, did normal people do?

If that sounds like a naive, even condescending, premise, that's because it is. Reading the introduction, I had a picture of Wendt, regally elegant and suitably perfumed, dismounting from her stratospheric success to walk among the plebs. Reading on, however, it becomes apparent that, while fun, such Jana-bashing is unfair. Despite its premise, *Nice Work* is for the most part a success.

Wendt's method is simple: spend time with nine different people, then write a chapter on each, exploring how their work informs their lives,



variously lifting them up and throwing them down, hurting them or healing them. Subject is everything here and Wendt has chosen well. There's the dyspeptic priest, the struggling boxer, the weather observer, the forensic anthropologist, the chief executive, the foley artist (someone who manufactures sounds for movies), the sculptor, the circus acrobat and a handful of volunteers who work at Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre.

It's a testimony to Wendt's writing that, despite having little in the way of narrative, the chapters fairly skip along, drawing the reader into disparate and often alien worlds, from an exhumed burial site in East Timor to a testosterone-drenched boxing gym. Finely calibrated and acutely observed, Wendt's prose is up to almost any challenge, whether it be capturing the boxer's untuned belly, "blousy with flab", or the implausible relief of a grieving relative upon glimpsing the disinterred skull of a long-dead loved one.

Still, some chapters work better than others. The weather observer bored me and the portrait of the sculptor, 92-year-old Tom Bass, fell flat. But those on the boxer (Brett "Bad Boy" Smith), the foley artist Helen Brown and "The Volunteers" are all engaging, as is the portrait of "The Priest", Father Arthur Bridge.

Overfed, patrician in tastes and a

little too fond of his own voice, Bridge is at a sensitive time in his career, having just been transferred from his beloved parish of Blacktown, a move he interprets as a demotion. Depressed, he takes himself off to spend Sunday night in a four-star hotel. Bridge loves opera and Aboriginal art; he has his vestments tailor made in Belgium from costly silk, and he enjoys a glass of French champagne or "a good claret, after my daily crucifixions". Bullied at school, he has sought shelter in a church career but the church hasn't been all he expected.

Bridge's is the first chapter in the book but, in a sense, it's the high point, if only because it's the closest Wendt gets to saying what she really thinks of her subjects. She would doubtless contend that what she thinks is irrelevant. But for all the fine writing and elegant insights, there is something curiously bloodless and anthropological about her approach, her tone sometimes slipping into mannered neutrality. Her subjects become like butterflies pinned to the wall, minutely admired and pored over but ultimately a little abstract. The odd joke wouldn't have gone astray, either. As they say, all work and no play ...

Jana Wendt is a guest at next week's Sydney Writers' Festival (swf.org.au).