The Golden Age, JOAN LONDON VINTAGE, $32.99

The best way to plumb the lovely depths of this novel is to let it reveal itself: "He sometimes thought he only loved properly in retrospect"; or: "Once you have tasted meaninglessness, you lose any idea of reward, or punishment, or conventional virtue. He only knew he couldn't afford to lose one more thing." Or a man listening to his wife play the piano: "He was standing in a small stuffy room, listening to a summation of all the tragedy and beauty of his life".

The Golden Age itself is a summation of the tragedy and beauty of several lives. It is Joan London's third novel. Her two other, Gilgamesh and The Good Parents, won significant prizes and had unusual popular acclaim. Readers sense authenticity and respond to it.

Before Jonas Salk found the miracle cure, the endless golden Australian summers were always undercut by the dread of polio. There were entire hospitals devoted to the young people whose lives were frozen, or ended, by this swift, cruel bacteria. The Golden Age is set in one such hospital, in Perth, in 1954. Lively, charming, clever Frank is the only child of two Jewish survivors of the war. He is all his parents have left and they go about their lives in this baffling new country, staying alive in an everyday way because of their son. Staying alive is their duty. Then, as if past suffering isn't enough, their son contracts polio.

Frank turns out to be one of the lucky ones. He'll walk with a limp for the rest of his life and the aftermath of the disease will return years later, but he will have a life. As will Elsa, the 13-year-old girl who looks like "a drawing in lead pencil" and with whom Frank falls in love. "Elsa" means "truth".

Children can, and do fall in love and love denied is famously inspirational to artists. Elsa is Beatrice to Frank's Dante. Frank, a naughty schoolboy pre-polio, is destined to become a poet because of his experience of two loves in the convalescent home.

His and Elsa's love story is the constant, but it intersects with several other types of love: the "joy" that the vibrant sister-in-charge, Olive Penny, finds in casual sex; the abrasive, necessary love Frank's parents, Meyer and Ida, have for one another, and not least the primal love parents have for their children. And there is the disinterested, capable love that the nurses give to their charges.

Thomas Mann, whose own great novel The Magic Mountain must be referenced here, said of institutionalisation and illness, "one must go through the deep experience of sickness and death to arrive at a higher sanity and health."

London is not ironic, nor as playful as Mann but gives the reader the experience of reading vertically. The surface remains still but the reader cuts down deeper and deeper to arrive at that shimmering, lucid point Mann describes - a higher sanity and health. It is transfixing as each character makes sense of themselves in a senseless world. The Golden Age serenely affirms the goodness in people and the divinity of the connections between.

It is also a luxurious gift, a poem in praise of the physical glory of Western Australia. Meyer, cultivated middle-European to the core, delivering soft drinks to the Perth suburbs, is ambushed by falling in love with the new country. It's a love as vital as any other.

And Ida, celebrated European virtuoso before the war, understands that her fate is to bring her gift to these untutored people. The scene when this most cultivated of women settles herself at the upright piano that has been dragged into the yard on a summer night graces the entire novel. London writes about love and goodness but she is also conscious of the severe, at times perplexing and unwanted, responsibilities of art.

I must finish as I began, with words from the final page, falling like a benediction on the calm thrill of this novel: "Polio is like love, Frank says, a little abashed because he has pronounced this before, often, and in at least two poems. Years later, when you think you have recovered, it comes back."

Joan London is a guest at the Melbourne Writers Festival.